

Vestibular Migraine

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Patient Fact Sheet

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Vestibular migraine (VM) is a type of migraine that can make people feel dizzy, off balance, and sensitive to movement, in addition to their migraine symptoms. Even though VM is a common reason for dizziness, it can be hard to diagnose because the symptoms are different for each person and there is often no headache during an episode. There is no single test to find VM, and tests usually look normal when symptoms are not present. However, the number and symptoms during episodes and a history of migraine are part of new criteria used to diagnose VM. The exact cause of VM is not known but it may be related to how the brain communicates between the pathways for the inner ear and how it understands pain.

What are Symptoms of Vestibular Migraines?

- Vertigo (feeling like the room is spinning or moving)
- Lightheaded type of dizziness
- Difficulty maintaining balance or walking
- Feeling like you are rocking, tilting, or having motion sickness
- motion sensitivity or feeling worse when you move your head or body
- Disorientation when you move your head, look at moving objects, or are in busy environments
- Pressure or ringing in your ears

Migraine headaches can happen at the same time as these symptoms, at a different time, or in the past (sometimes starting in childhood). In some people who have migraines, dizziness or vertigo is even worse than the headache. Unlike a regular migraine, these VM symptoms noted above can last for minutes, hours, or even days.

Who gets Vestibular Migraines?

Vestibular migraines happen more often in women, especially at the time of periods or menopause. VM symptoms usually start between ages 30 and 50. Migraines usually start before the other symptoms such as dizziness. Sometimes, a person can go many years without migraines and then start having dizziness. Many people who get VM have a history of

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motion sickness as a child. It can also run in families – some family members might have a history of either migraines or dizzy spells.

How can Physical Therapy Help?

Physical Therapy (PT) with a vestibular therapist is an important part of treating VM. At your first visit, the physical therapist will ask about your symptoms and what makes them worse. You may fill out a questionnaire about how you feel and what you can do each day. The therapist will check your balance, walking, vision, and how your inner ear (vestibular system) works. If needed, they will look for other balance problems.

Your PT treatment will be made just for you. It will help your brain and inner ear work together to reduce symptoms, improve balance, and help you do more activities. You will learn exercises to do at home. Physical therapy may include:

- Balance training
- Head and eye coordination
- Education about your posture
- Breathing and relaxation techniques
- Finding what makes your symptoms worse (triggers)
- General exercise

Doing these exercises in PT should not make your symptoms worse. If they do, your PT will change your home program. Treatment is more successful if your migraines and anxiety are being controlled with medicine, behavioral therapy, or diet changes.

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