

All About Aging

by Maija Sanna, M.D.

Putting a Medical Spin on Dizziness

Whether it was too many turns on the dance floor, the boat ride to Catalina or that glass of champagne at a New Year's party, dizziness is a feeling that affects everyone at one time or another. Of course, dizziness is a broad term and can describe several different sensations. Even though dizziness is common, if you experience recurrent spells or intense episodes of dizziness, make sure to see your primary-care doctor to review your symptoms. When discussing dizziness with your doctor, he or she will want to clarify whether the dizziness is related to vertigo or lightheadedness.

Lightheadedness is the feeling that you are going to faint. With lightheadedness, there is no spinning sensation, but you may feel better when lying down. This feeling often occurs because of a drop in blood pressure. It can also occur if your heart beats too fast or too slow.

Vertigo is the sensation that the room is spinning around you. It can be accompanied by nausea and even vomiting. Your ability to walk straight might be

altered and it can lead to a loss of balance and falls. Common causes of vertigo include benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV), Meniere's disease and vestibular neuritis. Other causes of vertigo include migraines, stroke and certain medications.

BPPV-related vertigo is typified by brief episodes that occur with specific movements of the head. It is caused by crystals in the inner ear that get in the wrong position and can be treated by specific repositioning maneuvers that can be done in the doctor's office and, sometimes, at home.

Meniere's disease is thought to be related to fluid buildup in the inner ear, causing recurrent spells of vertigo, ringing in the ears (tinnitus) and hearing loss. These episodes typically last more than 20 minutes. Treatment often involves the use of diuretics and a low-sodium diet.

Vestibular neuritis and labyrinthitis are likely related to a viral infection that can last several days to weeks. Steroids are sometimes prescribed to relieve the symptoms.



If you experience dizziness, make sure to tell your doctor about any history of fainting or palpitations (rapid heart racing) that accompany your dizziness. It is also important to note if the symptoms are preceded by any specific activity, such as after eating, changing positions, bending over or turning your head in specific directions. Review medications with your doctor and mention if there have been any recent changes. Be sure to include any over-the-counter medications you take as well. Your doctor will want to do a full physical examination and possibly further tests depending on your symptoms.

Recurrent dizziness is not just annoying. It can be a symptom of a more serious medical condition, so it is important to be evaluated by your primary doctor or specialist. Here's to a healthy, happy and hopefully dizzy-free 2015!

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