

Get me off this ride!

Physiotherapy for Vestibular Disorders



By Amanda McLean

Have you ever gone to bed feeling perfectly fine, only to wake up in the morning and find the whole room is spinning? Then you try to get out of bed and you've lost almost all ability to balance? This is one example of the dramatic effects of a vestibular/inner ear condition.

Some of us are lucky and have never had this troubling experience, outside from the moments after getting off a tilt a whirl. But for those who have, they often find themselves in the emergency room terrified and worried that something is seriously wrong. These symptoms can go on for days, weeks or months! The good news is that if it is a vestibular condition it can be assessed and treated by many physiotherapists. An increasing number of physiotherapists are gaining in depth knowledge and skill to diagnose and treat many different causes of dizziness.

The situation described above is usually diagnosed as BPPV (Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo). This is a condition where the otoconia/crystals of the inner ear have been displaced. Long story short a physiotherapist can diagnose where the crystals have been displaced and perform repositioning maneuvers to replace the crystals back where they belong.

Once I have described this to patients I can get some pretty

interesting looks; it sounds a little unbelievable and perhaps too simplistic to fix their life altering condition by simply rolling in bed the right way. However studies have shown that, if done properly, the Epley maneuver (the most commonly used crystal repositioning technique) resolves symptoms in 93% of patients with BPPV in one week.

The key with the Epley and any other crystal repositioning treatment is that you need to properly diagnose where the crystals are before treatment, as this dictates which technique you should use. There are many self-help websites and videos on the internet that will claim you should treat this condition on your own; that may be misguided. First you should see your doctor to rule out any medical conditions that could also be causing your symptoms (eg. inner ear infection, viruses, vascular, eye diseases etc). There can be many reasons for dizziness, spinning and balance loss; BPPV is just one of them. Once your doctor has diagnosed BPPV you will want to see a physiotherapist to ensure you receive treatment to recover as quickly as possible.

The vestibular system and balance is a complicated interaction between many systems including the eyes, ears and sensory receptors through your neck. If one of those systems is

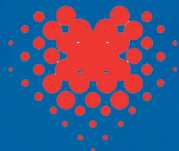
compromised disharmony occurs and dizziness is the result. Luckily physiotherapists are also trained to assess and treat dysfunction in the neck as well as give exercises to recalibrate your eyes with your ears and neck. These exercises work to improve how you integrate sensory information, which will affect how you perceive and react to the world around you.

The populations most at risk for vestibular issues are older adults (BPPV is relatively uncommon under the age of 50, unless an injury or incident occurs) and children where there is a higher incidence of both falls and concussions.

Proper management and prevention of recurrence by a vestibular trained physiotherapist can make all the difference between suffering with vertigo or having a successful recovery.

Amanda McLean is a physiotherapist at River Heights Physiotherapy; you can find Amanda McLean and many other great physiotherapists in the find a physiotherapist section of our website mbphysio.org

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