

DIZZINESS AND VERTIGO, SHOULD YOU BE WORRIED?

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You all will wonder why I am writing about such common symptoms as dizziness and vertigo, because almost all you and me have experienced these symptoms at some time or other in our life and have dismissed them as 'nothing'. Most times dizziness and vertigo are felt only for a few moments and do not happen again. Sometimes these symptoms may be an indication of a serious undetected illness especially if these symptoms are frequent, so it would make sense to know about what really is dizziness and what really is meant by vertigo. Many times these two symptoms are used loosely to denote a number of different sensations such as feeling 'light-headed' or weak or unsteady on one's feet (swaying), or even feeling faint.

When a person feels that the surroundings are spinning or moving e.g. the walls/furniture/room is spinning while he/she is steady, that is real dizziness. When a person feels himself or herself spinning while the room is steady; that is vertigo. In everyday usage, these terms are often used interchangeably.

Dizziness and vertigo are symptoms of a condition called 'balance disorder'. Keeping one's body steady and balanced is a complex function where the brain must process information obtained from the different sensory organs such as the inner ear, the nervous system and eyes. If the information given to the brain from any of these organs is incorrect or the brain is unable to process this information, or the messages from the nervous system/ears/eyes are contradictory to each other; then the sense of balance is lost and a person experiences vertigo or dizziness.

The inner ear is one of the essential organs via which our body knows that it is in rotatory or circular motion e.g. as when we are on a carousel or are spinning around in circles in one place as children often do in play. The inner ear has a structure called 'labyrinth' which consists of three 'canals' which are fluid filled tubes, when the fluid in them moves due to the body's movement, signals go to the brain to perceive that the person is moving. The muscles and skeletal system and the eyes add to this information so the brain receives the composite of all this information and processes it so that the body maintains 'balance'.

If there is a disorder of balance, the individual may experience symptoms such as vertigo/dizziness or spinning, feeling of 'falling' or feeling light headed or unsteady. Some people may experience nausea or vomiting.

Causes of vertigo

There may be different causes of vertigo or dizziness

- benign positional vertigo e.g. feeling dizzy with sudden changes of head position. It usually happens as we age, but may also be associated with head trauma (injury)
- inflammation or infection in the inner ear which may be because of bacterial or viral causes
- Meniere's disease which is caused by the buildup of excess fluid in the inner ear. We do not know the cause of this disease and it may be associated with temporary hearing loss
- Vestibular migraine which is a type of severe motion sickness which is associated with a migraine headache. Attacks can last from a few hours to a few days
- Neuroma of the acoustic nerve which is a noncancerous growth of this nerve, which connects the inner ear with the brain
- very rapid changes in movement e.g. riding on roller coasters or other fast rides, cars or even sometimes airplanes may cause dizziness
- systemic causes can cause vertigo or dizziness such as extremely high blood pressure, or extremely low blood pressure can both be associated with feeling dizzy/vertigo. Dehydration from lack of fluids the body especially in the summer when one is outside and loses water and

salt through sweating; can cause dizziness. Very high fever may cause unsteadiness. Certain medications especially those taken to control blood pressure may cause dizziness and faintness if the blood pressure drops too far low. Medications taken for inducing sleep (sedatives) and anti-anxiety drugs (tranquilizers) and some drugs taken to control seizures may cause dizziness.

So, you see, there are a variety of reasons which can cause vertigo or dizziness, but must you worry and rush to the emergency room each time you experience this symptom? No, but if you experience some or more of the following symptoms, then it would be wise to consult your physician or go the emergency room

- 'worst headache of my life' with the dizziness or vertigo
- if you feel that there are changes in your vision e.g. blurred vision
- if you feel any 'weakness' in your body e.g. left or right sided weakness or numbness/tingling
- loss of speech or slurred speech
- hearing loss
- loss consciousness
- chest pain
- very rapid or slow heart rate

Your doctor will ask you many questions when you tell him or her about your dizziness, to try to determine what exactly is could be the cause of your dizziness. Your doctor may want to send you to be seen by an ENT (ear nose throat) specialist or even a neurologist if he suspects a cause in the ear or neurological problem.

The treatment of this symptom will depend upon the cause of the dizziness or vertigo. Once the cause is found, most causes are treatable by medication, very rarely is surgery required.

If you have any further questions please do speak with your physician.

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