

The Spin on Dizziness



It's a common problem as we age. In fact, it has been reported that 80% of people over 65 have experienced dizziness, vertigo, and imbalance. Almost 1 in 4 emergency room visits includes a complaint of dizziness.

Dizziness is a sensation of lightheadedness, unsteadiness, or faintness. Vertigo is the perception of spinning. Dizziness and vertigo are not diseases, but rather symptoms that can result from a vestibular (inner ear) disorder. However, it can also result from many other conditions not related to the inner ear, such as cardiovascular or neurological.

Our sense of balance is maintained through feedback from three systems: the vestibular system (inner ear); proprioception (receptors in the feet and spine); and vision. Our brain is constantly integrating this information to maintain balance, therefore problems with one or more of these systems, especially the vestibular system, can cause imbalance, dizziness, and vertigo.


Common vestibular disorders include Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo (BPPV), viral infections of the inner ear (labyrinthitis or vestibular neuritis), Meniere's, and injury to the inner ear caused by head trauma.

BPPV is the most common cause of vertigo.

People with BPPV report having episodes of dizziness brought on with certain positions. Most commonly, it is lying flat, rolling over in bed, getting up in the morning, looking up to the ceiling, and bending forward. It can be one, or a combination of these positions.

BPPV occurs when 'debris' - or more specifically, a calcium carbonate crystal - becomes displaced within the inner ear. There are multiple causes for the crystals to be displaced, but, it most often tends to be a spontaneous occurrence. This displaced crystal then overstimulates or influences hair cells that are responsible for relaying head movement to the brain, thus disturbing one's balance and equilibrium, resulting in vertigo.

Treatment for BPPV is very effective. Physiotherapists, trained in Vestibular Rehabilitation Therapy, will relocate the crystal, through a series of specific head and body positions, which moves the crystal away from the sensitive hair cells.

Although BPPV accounts for a large percentage of vertigo, it is not the only cause. Talk to your doctor if you have these symptoms or think you may have BPPV. 

Robina Palmer is registered physiotherapist and co-owner of Sun City Physiotherapy. She has furthered her physiotherapy studies with training at The Emory University School of Medicine in Georgia for the treatment of vertigo, dizziness and balance disorders. Robina works at Sun City Physiotherapy's downtown Kelowna clinic



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Downtown	Glenmore	Winfield
1468 St. Paul St. 250-861-8056	103-437 Glenmore Rd. 250-762-6313	40-9522 Main St. 250-766-2544

www.suncityphysiotherapy.com