

# Dizziness

## What is dizziness?

Dizziness is often used to describe different symptoms. It can mean that you feel lightheaded, unsteady, or woozy, or it may mean you feel like you or the room is spinning. It is important for you to explain to your provider what you mean when you say you are feeling dizzy. The 2 most common conditions referred to by the term dizziness are lightheadedness and vertigo.

Lightheadedness is the feeling that you can get when you stand up too fast and feel like you might faint. Sometimes the room even “goes black” when, for a few seconds, there’s not enough oxygen in your brain.

The feeling that you are spinning or the room is spinning is called vertigo. It is a loss of balance. It makes it hard to keep standing. In fact, you cannot tell which way “up” is. This loss of balance often comes with nausea and vomiting and sometimes sweating. Often, even as you lie in bed, the room seems to be spinning around you. It can be very disabling for days or weeks.

## What is the cause?

Dizziness is a symptom, not a disease. Most often it is mild and doesn’t last long, and a cause is not found. Sometimes it is a sign of another problem.

Lightheadedness can be caused by tiredness, stress, fever, dehydration, low blood sugar, low blood pressure, anemia, head injury, heart or circulation problems, or stroke. Dizziness is a common problem during pregnancy. It can also be caused by some medicines.

Feelings of vertigo may be caused by an infection or disease in the inner ear. For example, one possible cause is inflammation of the inner ear called labyrinthitis. Other inner ear problems that can trigger vertigo are Ménière’s disease and positional vertigo.

As you get older, you may have atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) or arthritis in your neck. These diseases may cause vertigo or lightheadedness when you suddenly move your head or bend your head back. Dizziness of both kinds happens more often in your later years than at other ages but it is not always caused by disease.

Some mental health problems can cause lightheadedness. For example, anxiety might cause fast, shallow breathing, which can make you feel lightheaded.

Less common causes of dizziness are tumors or infections in the brain, or multiple sclerosis (MS).

## How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask you to describe your dizziness and how it happens in as much detail as you can. Your provider will want to know about any other symptoms or medical problems you are having. Your provider may see if

you get dizzy again by doing things that may have caused your dizziness, such as rapid breathing.

Your provider will examine your ears, eyes, and nervous system. You may have a CT or MRI scan of the brain to look for something that might be causing dizziness, such as a tumor, stroke, or multiple sclerosis.

## **How is it treated?**

The treatment depends on the cause of the dizziness. If your healthcare provider finds a problem that is causing the dizziness, you will be treated for the problem. For example, if you have Ménière's disease, your provider may recommend a low-salt diet to decrease any swelling in your inner ear. You may also be given steroid medicine to decrease swelling and inflammation. If your provider thinks you have a bacterial infection, he or she may prescribe antibiotics. In some cases antiviral medicines may be prescribed.

Your provider may also prescribe medicine for the balance mechanism in your inner ear. This medicine is usually the same medicine you might take for motion sickness, such as meclizine (Antivert). The medicine decreases the feeling of vertigo, but it can make you sleepy.

## **How long will the dizziness last?**

Depending on the cause, mild vertigo usually lasts no longer than 1 to 2 weeks. More severe vertigo can last several weeks. With Ménière's disease, the vertigo may come and go over time, or it can become an ongoing problem.

Lightheadedness usually lasts only a few seconds or maybe a minute. Depending on the cause, it may happen occasionally or every time you stand up. In most cases when your healthcare provider determines and treats the cause of your lightheadedness, it goes away. Sometimes, especially if you have a number of medical problems and are taking several medicines, it can be a challenge to find the cause and cure for the lightheadedness. It is important to work with your provider and to let him or her know what is working and what is not. It is important to treat the lightheadedness to prevent falls.

## **How can I take care of myself?**

Try to avoid positions or activities that cause dizziness. Move slowly, especially when you stand up. If you feel dizzy while standing in one spot for a long time, shift your weight from one leg to the other. Keep your knees slightly flexed, not "locked" straight. Shifting your weight will help get your circulation going again. If you keep being dizzy, sit or lie down on your side and wait for the feeling to go away.

Especially try to avoid sitting or standing in one position for a long time if you are pregnant.

If you get dizzy while you are driving, pull over to the side of the road and wait until the dizziness goes away. Do not drive a car or run machinery when you are dizzy.

If you smoke, stop. If someone else in your household smokes, ask them to smoke outside. Smoking can increase dizziness.

Call 911 for emergency help right away if:

- You suddenly have other symptoms, such as double vision, blindness, or numbness or weakness on one side of your face or body. These symptoms with dizziness might mean you are having a stroke, and strokes need to be treated right away. Some strokes can be prevented by treatment within 3 hours of the first symptoms.
- You have lightheadedness with chest discomfort or arm, neck, or jaw pain.

Follow your healthcare provider's instructions. Ask your provider:

- How and when you will hear your test results
- How long it will take to recover
- What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

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