

Physical Therapy can help with Balance Disorders

A balance disorder is a condition that makes you feel unsteady or dizzy, as if you are moving, spinning, or floating, even though you are standing still or lying down. Balance disorders can be caused by certain health conditions, medications, or a problem in the inner ear or the brain.

Our sense of balance is primarily controlled by a maze-like structure in our inner ear called the Labyrinth, which is made of bone and soft tissue. At one end of the labyrinth is an intricate system of loops and pouches called the semicircular canals and the otolithic organs, which help us maintain our balance. At the other end is a snail-shaped organ called the cochlea, which enables us to hear. The medical term for all of the parts of the inner ear involved with balance is the vestibular system.

What are the signs?

If your balance is impaired, you may feel as if the room is spinning. You may stagger when you try to walk or fall when you try to stand up. Some of the symptoms you might experience are:

- Dizziness or vertigo (a spinning sensation)
- Falling or feeling as if you are going to fall
- Lightheadedness, faintness, or a floating sensation
- Blurred vision
- Confusion or disorientation

Other symptoms are nausea and vomiting, diarrhea, changes in heart rate and blood pressure, and fear, anxiety, or panic. Some people also feel tired, depressed, or unable to concentrate. Symptoms may come and go over short time periods or last for longer periods of time.

What can be done?

There are more than a dozen different balance disorders. The first thing a doctor will do to treat a balance disorder is determine if your dizziness is caused by a medical condition or medication. If it is, your doctor will treat the condition or suggest a different medication. Your physical therapist may describe ways for you to handle daily activities that will reduce the risk of falling and injury when changing positions, walking or when in the bathroom . For positional vertigo there are a series of simple movements that a vestibular physical therapist can provide using postural control exercises.

To reduce your risk of injury from dizziness you will have to adjust your environment in order to make it as safe as possible at home and at work. You also should wear low-heeled shoes and use a cane or a walker if necessary. If you have handrails in the home, inspect them periodically to make sure they

are safe and secure. Conditions at work may need to be modified or restricted. Driving a car may be especially hazardous.

Some people with a balance disorder may not be able to fully relieve their dizziness and will have to develop ways to cope with it on a daily basis. Your physical therapist can help by developing an individualized treatment plan that combines, head, body, and eye exercises to decrease dizziness and nausea.