

# Vertigo (BPPV)

## WHAT IS VERTIGO?

Vertigo is a type of dizziness. It can begin seconds after a certain head movement or change in position and lasts less than a minute if the head is kept still. Movement of the head will often make the dizziness worse.

You may feel as if you are spinning or not well balanced. You may feel like you are going to fall over.

While there are some serious causes of vertigo, in most cases it is not a serious condition and usually gets better with time.

## WHAT CAUSES VERTIGO?

The most common cause of vertigo is called benign positional paroxysmal vertigo or BPPV. It is called BPPV because it is benign (not harmful to your health), paroxysmal (it can occur without warning), positional (it is brought on by a specific type of head movement) and vertigo (you feel a sensation of spinning).

BPPV happens when tiny particles (crystals) in the balance centre of the inner ear are disturbed, usually by sudden movement. This causes the spinning sensation.

It is a common problem that can affect people of all ages.

Activities that bring on vertigo can vary. They often involve moving your head into a certain position (quickly) such as:

- looking up
- lying on one ear
- rolling over in bed
- getting out of bed
- bending over.

There are other causes of vertigo including head injuries (such as a knock to the head), stroke, circulation problems, infections, inner ear disorders and the degeneration of inner ear structures. Your doctor or healthcare professional will check for these. For some people the cause may not be found.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

- Dizziness or spinning sensation
- Feeling light-headed
- Balance problems
- Nausea – feeling like you are going to vomit

These symptoms usually get better once you are in a different position.

Pain, ringing in the ears (tinnitus) or deafness is uncommon.

If you have more serious symptoms – speech difficulty, double vision, unsteady walking, difficulty swallowing, altered strength or feeling in your legs or arms, ringing in your ears or deafness – you should seek medical help urgently.

## TREATMENT

Vertigo often gets better by itself. Many people improve without treatment.

In the emergency department or urgent care centre you may be treated with anti-nausea medications such as prochlorperazine (Stemetil). This helps the symptoms but will not prevent vertigo attacks and does not 'cure' the condition. These may also be prescribed to use at home but should not be needed for more than a few days.

Your doctor or physiotherapist may also perform a set of movements of your head and neck called the

'Epley manoeuvre', which try to put the particles back in a better position.

You may be advised to perform 'Brandt-Daroff exercises' (see opposite).

You may be referred to a specialist doctor for further treatment or to rule out other rare causes for your dizziness. You may also be referred to a vestibular physiotherapist (who specialises in dizziness and vertigo) if it is expected you will require further treatment after being discharged.

## HOME CARE

Your doctor or healthcare professional will advise you on what to do to help with BPPV.

Here are some things you can do at home.

- Avoid head positions that provoke an attack.
- Do the Brandt-Daroff exercises as instructed.
- Avoid sleeping on the affected or 'bad' side.
- Raise your head on two or three pillows when resting.
- In the morning, get up slowly and sit on the edge of the bed for a minute before standing.
- Take prescribed medications as directed.
- Do not drive until your symptoms have completely resolved.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

If the exercises are done regularly, the symptoms should settle over the next 10 days, although it can take longer. Most people return to work or normal activities within a week.

About one in three people will have a new attack within a year. While these attacks can cause discomfort there is usually no long-term damage. Some people may have ongoing problems with balance, and surgery may be needed.

Some people only ever have one attack.

Return to the emergency department or urgent care centre if you develop:

- speech or swallowing difficulties
- facial, arm or leg weakness or numbness.

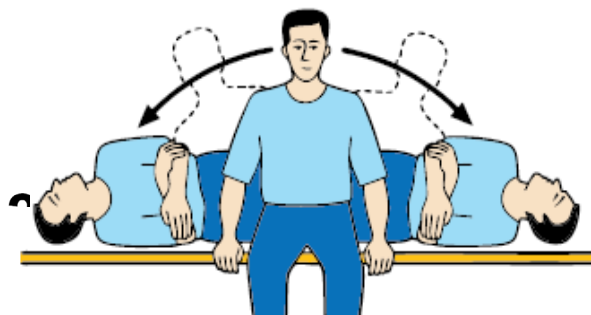
## BRANDT-DAROFF EXERCISES

The Brandt-Daroff exercises (Figure 1) are thought to disperse any tiny particles away from the balance centre in your ear, therefore getting rid of the cause of your dizziness.

You may be anxious that the exercises will bring back your symptoms. This is normal. However, the exercises will only work if you feel dizzy as you do them. The dizziness will get less with time.

1. Sit on the edge of the bed.
2. Turn your head 45 degrees (look to the left). Lie down quickly on the right side. Ensure the back of the head rests on the bed. Wait 20–30 seconds or until the dizziness stops.
3. Sit upright. Wait 20–30 seconds for any dizziness to settle.
4. Repeat on the other side. Turn the head slightly to the right before lying down quickly on the left side.
5. Do this five times on each side (takes about 10 minutes). Repeat three times a day.

**Figure 1: Brandt-Daroff exercises**



## Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or healthcare professional.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.\*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

\* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Contact a physiotherapist  
[choose.physio/findaphysio](http://choose.physio/findaphysio)
- Visit the Better Health Channel at  
[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au).

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email **[emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au](mailto:emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au)**

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