Vertigo

Treating Dizziness Naturally

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Introduction
Vertigo is the feeling that your surroundings are moving when in reality they are still. Symptoms include feeling off-balance or feeling like the room is spinning. If it’s severe, there may be nausea and vomiting associated with it, and there could be an increased risk of falling. Vertigo can last for a few minutes or even days. Vertigo needs to be differentiated from feeling light-headed, which is usually due to a lack of circulation to the brain or due to low blood pressure. Feeling light-headed can also cause dizziness, but it is treated differently (it is suggested you lie down, that way you help the blood get back to your brain). Vertigo tends to occur later on in life. It actually happens when the position-sensing systems of the body are not communicating properly with the brain. The brain uses a number of different inputs to get an idea of spatial positioning. For example, it uses information from vision and from sensory nerves in the limbs; importantly, it also uses information from the inner ear. Often, dysfunction is this area is causing the problem. The cells in the inner ear have specialized motion sensors and if these sensors are conflict with the remaining inputs, there is a risk of vertigo.

Other common causes include migraine headaches, decreased blood flow through the arteries that supply the brain (called vertebral insufficiency), and multiple specific inner-ear disorders. Vertigo is a common side effect of many medications. It can also occur if taking too much medication or combining medication with other substances such as alcohol. Getting a viral infection like a cold or flu can cause temporary vertigo. Dehydration is another common cause and will also worsen light-headedness by lowering blood pressure. The most common ear disorder is called benign paroxysmal positional vertigo, or BPPV for short; in this condition, the ear structures called otoliths are not functioning properly. The otoliths normally contain crystals that help you stay
oriented with gravity. Sometimes, these crystals can become dislodged or damaged, and the result is that you have trouble responding to changes in head position. You are at higher risk of BPPV if you are over 60 years of age or if you have had head injuries.[1] The treatment involves repositioning the head a number of times at your health-care practitioner’s office. If there is excessive debris in the ear, an ear lavage may also be indicated.

**Lifestyle Changes**

If you are feeling dizzy, try lying down for a few minutes and resting; this will help increase the blood flow to your brain, and it may help increase the sensory inputs that the room is still. It will also help prevent you from hurting yourself in a nasty fall. It may help to prop yourself up a bit to help relieve the sensation of spinning. When getting up, make sure you do so slowly, so that if things have not improved, you can readjust as necessary. Vertigo is associated with a few metabolic parameters, which we’ll discuss next.

Vertigo has been associated with high cholesterol and high blood sugar.[2] In particular, this seems to be the case with low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (or LDL, the “bad cholesterol”), as well as in diabetics, and even in those with altered levels of thyroid hormones. This suggests that diet could be a superb treatment option for people who fall into these categories, since metabolic disorders often respond quite well to diet changes. Atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries, and high blood pressure can also indirectly cause vertigo. So from a dietary perspective, ensuring that you obtain plenty of fruits and vegetables is a good idea. You can also make dietary changes by removing foods that are considered harmful, such as processed foods, simple sugars, and salt (especially if you are salt-sensitive). The same recommendations are helpful to moderate cholesterol levels, but in addition, you could add two tablespoons of olive oil daily and a handful of almonds. Both have been shown to help improve cholesterol levels. Finally, fiber intake (either supplemental, or through fruit and vegetable intake) can help regulate metabolic conditions.

If you are a smoker, it is always wise to reduce your consumption or try to quit, since smoking worsens atherosclerosis. Incorporating a daily routine of exercise is an excellent way to improve metabolic health. In particular, at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise five times per week is a standard recommendation. If you are able to do higher-intensity
workouts or resistance training, then that’s even better. Whatever exercise you decide on, make sure that you’re able to increase your heart rate during the activity. You should notice that the exercise is at least moderate in intensity, and if you break a sweat that’s a good sign you are doing it at the appropriate level.

Supplements

There are quite a number of potential supplements that can be used to help with vertigo. Omega-3 fatty acids (or fish oil) may be helpful in reducing inflammation and helping to reduce blood pressure.[3] Also nutritionally, vitamin D and calcium intake may help prevent low bone mineral density, which has been associated with BPPV. Vitamin $B_6$ can help to relieve symptoms of dizziness and nausea, especially if there are deficiencies. Red blood cells use vitamin $B_6$ in helping to deliver oxygen to cells. Vitamin C is another option and acts as an antioxidant. It can help reduce the damage caused by free radicals and may provide relief of vertigo symptoms.

From a herbal perspective, *Ginkgo biloba*, ginger, rosemary, and vinpocetine are potential options. *Ginkgo* and rosemary are known to be good for helping to promote circulation in the brain.[4] Even when tested in quantitative magnetic resonance imaging, *Ginkgo* shows mild increases in cerebral blood flow. Vinpocetine is typically taken at a lower dose and is described as having similar effects. When selecting herbs, ensure that you obtain high-quality herbs. For example, with ginkgo it’s important to have the right percentage of the standardized extracts (called ginkolisides). It’s also important to use the appropriate dose. Going too low will result in having no therapeutic benefit, whereas going too high could cause side effects like nausea, or be potentially unsafe.[4]

Just as vertigo is commonly caused by a side effect of medication, it can also be a symptom of excessive heavy metals. This can be tested using a hair analysis or a urine analysis, which if completed will then provide you and your health-care practitioner with a full report of heavy metal levels. Mercury poisoning has been implicated in ear disturbances, but even moderately higher levels of mercury can cause damage. If this is the situation, it may be worth examining the possibility of removing dental fillings that contain it. However, if they’ve been long-standing, some experts recommend actually leaving them in, since the majority of the mercury might have already been absorbed. If
heavy metal toxicity is a concern, a detoxification protocol may help ameliorate vertigo symptoms.

Putting It All Together
If you are experiencing symptoms of dizziness, it is strongly recommended that you seek guidance from your healthcare practitioner. Since the causes are numerous, additional testing may be warranted so that a cause can be narrowed down as much as possible. Be aware when you are moving around or upright that you could lose your balance, so plan accordingly by considering using a cane or having support with you. Sit down immediately if you start to feel dizzy, and use good lighting, especially at night-time. When going into a standing position, ensure that you do it slowly. If lying, start by sitting up for a minute and then, when you are comfortable, move to a standing position. This will help to ensure that your body has time to adapt to your position changes.

From a lifestyle perspective, we suggested optimizing your metabolic health. This means reducing or quitting smoking, drinking alcohol in moderation, and making sure you are eating fruits and vegetables. If you are afflicted with another health condition (like high blood pressure, high blood sugar, or high cholesterol), it’s important to make sure you decrease your risk factors and try to keep it well-managed. For example, we discussed incorporating daily intake of healthy fats (like omega-3 fatty acids) to decrease inflammation, or olive oil (two tablespoons a day) to help with healthy cholesterol levels. The other big lifestyle suggestion was exercising five times a week, and to a moderate intensity so that you increase your heart rate appropriately. All of these habits will help reduce your metabolic risk profile.

Looking at natural supplements, there were multiple nutritional and herbal options. The rationale behind using vitamin therapy includes providing antioxidant support as well as some vitamins (like $B_6$), which have been shown to be effective in decreasing the symptoms of dizziness. The majority of the herbal options discussed work by promoting cerebral circulation. In general, these also have side benefits like improving cognition and helping with the health of small vessels and arteries. The only caution is that you should only pursue herbal treatments (or any treatment really) under supervision to ensure high quality and correct dosing. Combining the lifestyle, nutritional, and herbal treatments is usually safe and may allow for additive benefits. Please consult your naturopathic doctor for a thorough work-up.
References


