

# For Vertigo, Give Physical Therapy a Whirl

by Dave Whaley

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ALTON – Dizziness and imbalance are among the most common complaints in older adults. It's a growing health concern, as this puts individuals at a higher risk of suffering a fall.

It has been estimated that more than 40 percent of adults 40 and over will experience some form of dizziness over the course of a lifetime. In fact, falls are the leading factor for hospital admissions in adults 65 and over.

While the underlying causes of dizziness in the elderly are many, it can be associated with functional decline as well as an interruption of daily activities. Rather than expensive medical testing or medication, it may be beneficial to seek a referral to physical therapy for vestibular rehabilitation.

The vestibular system, housed in the inner ear, takes the information it receives and processes it to make modifications for eye movements, posture, balance, and orientation in space -- all of which can be addressed by a physical therapist.

"It is important that a physical therapist performs a comprehensive examination with a battery of tests to assess what all needs to be focused on in a patient's plan of care to get them back to doing their usual activities," says Juliann Marth, PT, DPT, OCS, COMT, with Alton Memorial Hospital's Human Motion Institute.

One of the most frequent vestibular conditions is vertigo, more specifically benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV), which is a type of dizziness that is characterized by brief and intense episodes of spinning. It occurs when the calcium carbonate crystals that are housed in the inner ear become loose, causing a disruption in fluid and sending the brain a false signal that you are moving.

The resultant spinning sensation, although quick, can be felt with positional changes of the head such as rolling over in bed, leaning back in the beautician's chair, or bending down to empty the dishwasher. Many people can recover from BPPV with a simple, non-invasive head and neck maneuver performed by a therapist, along with an individualized exercise plan for optimal recovery.

"Successfully treating vertigo can be truly life-changing, and getting patients back to their normal daily life is definitely the most rewarding part for me," says Taylor Cobbel, PT, DPT, MBA.

Balance is a skill that requires multiple systems in the body to work together in a coordinated fashion, and vestibular rehab may help strengthen those systems and develop compensatory mechanisms in the brain. By developing an individualized exercise program focusing on eye movements, balance training and head motions, the

goal is to decrease fall risk, reduce dizziness-related symptoms and prevent physical decline.

“Significant changes can be made in a person’s balance and functional abilities with the proper vestibular treatment,” says Judi O’Hearn, PT, DPT, MHS. “In many cases, individuals will report they can return to 100 percent of their normal activity.”

There are a variety of other conditions that lead to dizziness or imbalance, and the Human Motion Institute therapists can help determine what course of treatment is best. If you think that you could benefit, contact your physician for a referral.

Dr. Mary Schinkel, DO, is with BJC Medical Group ENT Specialists on the Alton Memorial Campus (Medical Office Building B, Suite 230) and often makes referrals to HMI for vertigo. To make an appointment with Dr. Schinkel, call her office at 618-463-7247.