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VESTIBULAR MIGRAINE

What are vestibular migraines?

Vestibular migraines are the most common cause of chronic dizziness, affecting 2.7% of Americans per year. Forty percent of people with a history of migraine will have vestibular symptoms at some point in their lifetime. Symptoms are different in each and every patient, which can at times make this difficult to diagnose.

What are the signs and symptoms of Vestibular Migraine?

- Common symptoms include a swaying sensation or imbalance with a history of motion sensitivity, either when driving in a car or with rapid head movement.
- Vestibular Migraine can occur with acute bouts of moderate to severe symptoms or chronic mild low intensity symptoms.
- Duration of symptoms can range from seconds, hours, to days.
- Frequency of symptoms can vary from daily, weekly or monthly occurrences.
- Accompanying symptoms can include, but not limited to headache, photophobia (sensitivity to light) or phonosensitivity (intolerance to noise), visual aura, and hearing changes (38% of patients).

What is the cause of vestibular migraines?

Vestibular migraines, like other migraine syndromes, are still not fully understood. It is thought that it is caused by abnormal messages which lead to a widening of blood vessels in and around the brain. When this involves the blood vessels near the inner ear or the balance part of the brain it can lead to the vestibular symptoms you are having.

How is vestibular migraine diagnosed?

There are no blood or imaging tests that can definitively diagnose vestibular migraine. It is primarily diagnosed based on the history and physical exam, and occasionally other tests are necessary to exclude other possible diagnoses.

How are vestibular migraines treated?

Unlike some other causes of dizziness, there is no definitive, straightforward treatment for vestibular migraines. *The reality is that vestibular migraines may not ever completely go away, so the focus is on minimizing symptoms and working on coping skills so you can continue functioning and living your life.* There are many different options and different things work for different people.

There are three main directions to go with treatment:

- Vestibular rehabilitation therapy – There are specialized physical therapists who focus on treating problems with balance and dizziness. They will be able to perform exercises with you (that you will also be able to practice at home) which will help you manage the symptoms you are experiencing and help you identify what may be triggering your bad days.
- Nutrition – Migraines are closely tied into diet. This is not necessarily eating healthy or unhealthy, it means eating a *migraine healthy* diet. We often refer to a dietitian who will be able to work with you to help identify diet



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modifications which will help prevent headaches (if applicable) and dizziness episodes in a way that will help maintain your nutrition in other ways.

- **Medications** – This is typically a second-line option because all medications have side effects and most patients have a good response from the above two options. However, there are some cases where prescription migraine medications have a role and can really help. If these are necessary, we will refer you to a neurologist because they are more experienced in managing these medications. They will either prescribe you medications that prevent migraines or stop migraines once they start.

Please note – repositioning maneuvers such as the Epley or Semont maneuver will *not* help for vestibular migraine. That is a treatment specifically for a different cause of vertigo called benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV).

What can I do myself to help limit my symptoms?

- 1) *Identify triggers* – Keeping a symptom diary can help you identify what may have triggered bad days. Pay particular attention to what you ate and drank and activities you performed.
- 2) *Improve sleep* – Getting quality rest is critical! Avoid screen time, caffeine, or sleep aids (e.g. Benadryl) before bed as much as possible. If you think you may have sleep apnea seeing a sleep specialist is recommended, as this can lead to vestibular symptoms.
- 3) *Keep moving* – Often patients with vestibular migraine try to avoid movement – resist the urge! More movement is better. Ideally, 20 minutes of physical activity at least four times per week will go a long way in helping your symptoms. You may have some dizziness during these activities, and it is important to push through as much as you can. In the long run that will help your body learn to compensate.
- 4) *Take breaks* – Every hour, sit or stand and close your eyes for one minute with deep breathing.
- 5) *Manage stress* – Vestibular migraine symptoms are often worsened with stress. Removing stress from our lives is often not possible but minimizing it in any way will help.

Most common triggers of vestibular migraine symptoms

Environmental	Dietary
Stress	High salt diet
Sleep disturbances	MSG
Medications	Aspartame (artificial sweetener)
Hormonal fluctuations	Alcohol – especially red wine
Barometric pressure variations	Caffeine
Allergies	Chocolate
	Nuts
	Smoked meats
	Aged cheeses

Additional Resources



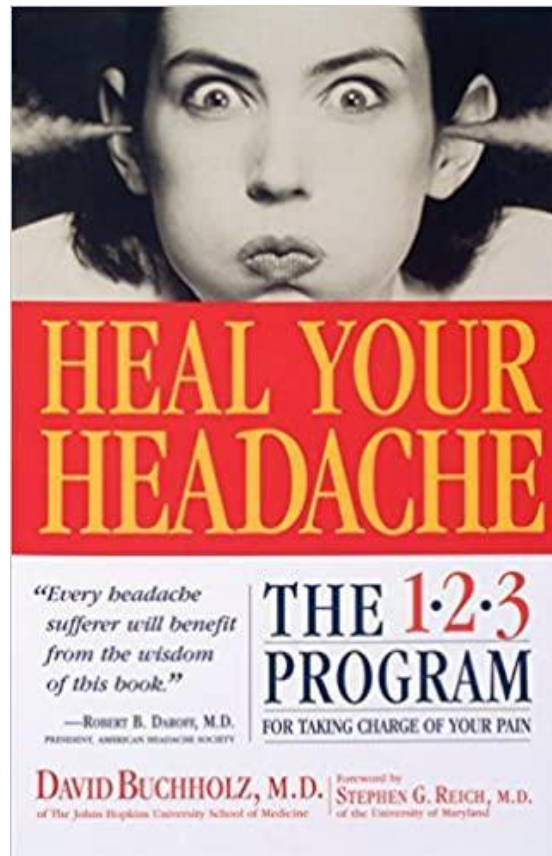
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Heal Your Headache: The 1-2-3 Program for Taking Charge of Your Pain, by David Buchholz



Parts of this were adapted from a handout created by Morgan Kriz, DPT