

Daily Union Article  
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Finding Balance

In 2003, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester of my pregnancy with my oldest son, I awoke one morning to a spinning world that left me severely nauseated and unable to walk. I literally fell out of bed and crawled to the bathroom. At the emergency room, I was treated for dehydration and vertigo.

“Vertigo?” I asked. How did I get vertigo... what is it and how can I get rid of it? Over the next several weeks, months, and yes, years – I learned a lot about vertigo and related balance disorders because I kept asking questions such as these.

Vertigo is a type of balance disorder that is characterized by a whirling dizziness that lasts a long time. In my case, because of that sensation of intense spinning, I was unable to eat, drink or keep food down for several days. My balance disorder disabled me from driving, working, or attending any public events for several months – well after the birth of my son. As crooked as that part of life’s journey was for me, I learned a lot about physical and emotional limitations and what it meant to be disabled, for which I am thankful to have learned.

According to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD), a balance disorder is defined as “a condition that makes you feel unsteady or dizzy. If you are standing, sitting or lying down, you might feel as if you are moving, spinning, or floating. If you are walking, you might suddenly feel as if you are tipping over.”

It is not uncommon for a person to have an occasional dizzy spell. The experience of dizziness can be unique for each individual. It might make them feel like to moving down a spiral tube, it might make them feel faint, or even an intense spinning like being on a merry-go-round at high speed. When dizzy spells are only occurring once in a while, a person doesn’t typically feel the need to see a doctor. However, when the “spells” are long lasting and/or occur more often, a doctor’s visit is warranted.

The National Institute of Health reports that more than 4 in 10 Americans at some time in their life will experience an episode of dizziness that is profound enough to send them to their doctor. Balance disorders can be caused by a variety of factors including health conditions, medications, or a problem with the inner ear or brain.

Symptoms of a balance disorder include:

- Dizziness or vertigo
- Falling or feeling as if you are going to fall
- Blurry vision
- Disorientation or confusion
- Lightheadedness, faintness, or the feeling of floating
- Other common symptoms include nausea and vomiting, diarrhea, changes in heart rate and blood pressure, fear, anxiety or panic.

During my long stint with balance disorder, I also struggled with an inability to concentrate and extreme exhaustion. I was told this was due to the severity of my symptoms. My body was fighting so hard to regain balance that many daily functions were being compromised.

These symptoms may come and go over the course of a day or last for a long time. You may or may not sense when the symptoms are coming on – often making it difficult to learn how to adapt to a balance disorder.

There are many causes of balance disorders which can sometimes be difficult to pin down. Some common causes include medications, head injury or ear infections. Fluctuations in blood pressure, especially if it is too low, can cause imbalance or dizziness. Even standing up too quickly can be a cause for feeling unsteady. Arthritis or eye-muscle imbalances are skeletal/visual system problems that can cause a balance disorder. The aging process increases your risk of having balance problems, as well.

Treatment for a balance disorder is determined by first looking at the cause for the imbalance. A doctor will look at any medication usage that could be contributing to the condition, as well as other health problems that may be afflicting the patient. It also depends on what type of balance disorder the patient has been diagnosed with.

A change in medication could be one way to relieve the patient of their imbalance. Another treatment, vestibular rehabilitation, was what finally relieved me of my vertigo. I was referred to a physical therapist that specialized in vestibular rehabilitation. The therapist reviewed my medical records and evaluated my responses as she walked me through a series of exercises that measured my body's ability to respond to various stimuli. My rehabilitation plan was designed for my specific challenges and limitations, making it unique from what other patients with a balance disorder may experience.

If you are concerned about your balance, the NIDCD recommends you use these self-evaluation questions to help you decide if it is time to contact your doctor:

Do I feel unsteady?

- Do I feel as if the room is spinning around me?
- Do I feel as if I'm moving when I know I'm sitting or standing still?
- Do I lose my balance and fall?
- Do I feel as if I'm falling?
- Do I feel lightheaded or as if I might faint?
- Do I have blurred vision?
- Do I ever feel disoriented—losing my sense of time or location?

If you answer “yes” to any of these questions, you should visit your doctor and share your concerns.

Finding and/or keeping your balance is an important part of maintaining your quality of life. For more information on how to build balance, feel free to contact me at the Geary County Extension office 238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!