

Dizziness

As children we used to explore the loss of balance after with turning around and around, when there would usually be a lot of laughter. However, as adults, dizziness is more likely to cause distress. In both age groups, there is a common underlying cause, which is inconsistency of input to the brain between various position sensors in the body.

Position sensors are located throughout the body, with those in joints, muscles and tendons providing us with a map of the body. Orientation of the head is provided by the eyes and by the inner ear, where 3 tiny semicircular canals at 90° to each other. The canals contain fluid and its movement informs us of the position of the head. Turning around and around, as we did as children, gets that fluid turning. Then when we stop, it keeps going. In that situation, our eyes and joints tell us we are not moving but the semicircular canals think we are still turning, so we feel dizzy.

Usually, when dizziness is experienced, there are similar factors occurring. These include sensory changes in the feet, stiffness and pain in the neck joints, and problems in the inner ear. Many of these can be helped by physiotherapy.

The reasons for sensory changes need to be identified. Depending on the diagnosis some improvements may be achieved. Stiffness and pain in neck joints can lead to dizziness because nerves from there are inhibited or slowed in their response, usually an effect of some sort of injury to those joints. Local treatment to those tissues usually means they respond well, although it may take some time.

Several things can lead to altered function of the inner ear. Occasionally crystals can form within one of the semicircular canals, where it will block movement of the fluid within. At other times there can be a change of action of the nerve within the canals and their destination cells in the brain. These are two quite different causes, so their treatment must be quite different, and both are successfully treated by physiotherapists.

It's also possible for more than one cause to be present at the same time, so a full assessment will be quite comprehensive. And treatment will usually include a range of exercises. These might be aimed at improving function at the affected area, regaining muscle strength and endurance, or regaining normal nerve function. As for other conditions treated by physiotherapists, your participation will facilitate the recovery process.

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