

HEALTHY *Lifestyles*

When tiny crystals cause vertigo, the solution might be easier than you think

By SALLY BAHO

FEELING UNBALANCED? Dizziness is a symptom of many disorders and diseases, but it can also be a problem with your vestibular system, a network found in the inner ear. If something goes awry, there's dizziness or a loss of balance that increases the risk of falling and can disrupt day-to-day life. According to the nonprofit Vestibular Disorders Association, "More than 35% of US adults aged 40 years and older (69 million people) experience vestibular dysfunction at some point in their lives; many of them go on to develop a chronic vestibular disorder."

The vestibular system is embedded deep in the ear and is about the size of your pinky nail. "It's a system of different organs, nerves and apparatuses within it," explained Sasha Geisler, a doctor of physical therapy, board-certified neurological clinical specialist, and owner of Monterey Mobile PT. She added that it's responsible for detecting when the body speeds up, slows down, or rotates in space, along with providing graviception — the ability to detect direction and gravity — giving the brain feedback so that people can maintain balance and move through space without any issues, Geisler said.

Back to normal

"I often get people who call me because they're feeling dizzy or unbalanced. My role is to evaluate the role of that dizziness by doing a thorough investigation of the inner ear and coming up with an appropriate treatment," Geisler said.

The evaluation is straightforward, with questions about symptoms and, for example, whether dizzy spells are brief, come on when changing position, or randomly. The



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DIZZY *con't. page 35A*

Sasha Geisler (right), a doctor of physical therapy, uses infrared goggles to help determine a patient's course of treatment.

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HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

Beautiful help that touches the heart

By LILY PATTERSON

AS A “Lipstick Angel” who provides cancer-sensitive beauty and skincare services to people while they’re undergoing chemotherapy and radiation, Madeleine Cooper sees enhancing someone else’s beauty not as a pursuit of perfection, but as a comfort at “the worst moments.”

Last year, members of the nonprofit Lipstick Angels visited more than 18,500 patients around the country.

“We’re the only beauty program in existence that goes bedside. We work with people in their most vulnerable moments, hooked up to that machine,” Amy Holiber, the group’s national program director, shared.

“It’s been so humbling to help people going through what can be the worst moments,” said Cooper, who spends up to 30 minutes with patients receiving chemotherapy or other infusions. A relaxing facial or expert makeup application brings out a glow that lingers after Cooper wheels her beauty cart to the next chair. Infusions can last as long as six hours, she pointed out, and she tries to see as many as 10 patients per visit.

“We also treat the caregivers, whoever is with the patients that day,” Cooper added. “Cancer is engulfing.”

Badge of courage

For three years, Cooper has volunteered her services weekly at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula’s cancer and inpatient rehab centers. In late April, as Lipstick Angels local program manager, she brought its services to Salinas Valley Health, where she spends two days a week in the outpatient infusion center.

Lipstick Angels was founded in 2012 by a former celebrity makeup artist and hospital volunteer who had accompanied



In April, Salinas Valley Health welcomed the Lipstick Angels, whose services help cancer patients to feel more comfortable and confident in their skin.

her grandmother to cancer treatments at Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles. Before receiving an infusion of chemotherapy, her grandmother would apply her favorite lipstick — “like a red badge of courage,” according to the organization.

Since 2012, its volunteers have visited hundreds of thousands of patients at 22 major medical centers throughout the country. A legion of licensed estheticians and professional makeup artists provide men and women with skincare, makeup and gentle massage, using supplies that are hypoallergenic and free of synthetic fragrances and other irritants. Hydrating

products relieve skin that is suddenly dry, sensitive and prone to burns and rashes that are side effects of cancer treatment.

The Peninsula is home to “a huge population” of oncology specialists for an area this size, according to Montage Health’s volunteer services manager Kelly Lepai. Additionally, Montage maintains partnerships with UCSF and Stanford University to expand access to clinical trials. Over the past decade, palliative services — those which provide comfort and aim to alleviate pain, stress and symptoms — including Lipstick Angels and a survivor-patient buddy program to help alleviate the many

side effects of cancer treatment, have been part of an expansion of that care.

Physical contact

“Programs like our cancer support volunteers and Lipstick Angels can be directly linked to patients’ psychological and emotional well-being,” Lepai said. A simple hand massage can provide the only moment of physical contact a patient has that day not involving a needle or blood pressure cuff.

However, volunteers like Cooper —

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clinician will also watch rapid eye movements (nystagmus) while having you put your head in different positions.

People use "vertigo" to describe many symptoms, but Geisler said true vertigo is a sensation that the room is spinning around you. It's often caused by calcium carbonate crystals in the inner ear that have somehow moved to the wrong place, a condition called benign paroxysmal positional vertigo, which can last for seconds to minutes.

People with the condition often provide "a very specific description of 'room-spinning,' which lasts less than 30 seconds and is preceded by a change in position, such as going from lying down to sitting up or rolling over in bed. It's visual and sensory. They see and feel it," she said. According to a 2025 paper published on the National Institutes of Health website, that form of vertigo is the most common cause of dizziness. It most often affects those 50 and older, and becomes more prevalent with age.

Through a maze

When she encounters that condition, Geisler expertly restores patients' balance using a series of specific head and body movements that guide the dislodged crystals back into the correct part of the inner ear, almost like guiding a marble through a maze by tilting in one of those old-fashioned hand-held puzzles.

"My job is to figure out where the crystals are displaced — which canal in the ear — and get them back into place," Geisler explained. Patients can usually get back to normal in one to three physical therapy sessions.

You might be wondering if these problems are preventable. Apart from general recommendations like eating a healthy diet, staying hydrated, limiting sodium and getting adequate sleep, there isn't much



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Sasha Geisler is a doctor of physical therapy.

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HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

Physical therapy and the triumph of Tank

By LISA CRAWFORD WATSON

THIS IS a Hallmark story of spirit and perseverance on the part of a little dog, paired with his person. Except this tale is true.

Sherry Shirah had always preferred bigger dogs, like her two German shorthair pointers. That was until she and her husband, Trey Williams, who were on a flight to Cabo San Lucas when they encountered the cutest little breed of dog they'd never seen. His person, seated near them, said he was a Cavapoo, a mix between a Cavalier King Charles spaniel and a miniature or toy poodle.

"I said to my husband, 'We're getting one. He can be your dog,'" Shirah said. "When we went to meet the breeder in Texas, a 4-week-old pup poked his little head through the doggie door, figured out how to pop through and ran right over to me. I'm convinced he chose me."

Yet it was her husband who named him, and he decided that since the pup would be a little guy raised in a household with two big pointers, he needed a substantial name. Williams settled on Tank. Although he couldn't grow into the stature of his name, at 8, Tank definitely has spirit.

That's especially true since he survived an accident that might have overcome a more fragile constitution. That was the day that Tank and his person both learned what they are made of.

It will be three years this June, Shirah said. Shirah has significant events delineate the phases of our lives.

"I'll never forget the moment. We were living in Florida," she said from her present home southeast of Sunset Center. "Tank ran full speed after a tennis ball in our yard and went headfirst into the brick steps. He dropped to the ground and started crying. His back legs didn't work. I picked him up and drove like a mad woman to the emergency vet."

The diagnosis was that little Tank had broken his back, which meant he needed the care of a neurosurgeon. Time was of the essence. Knowing there was no guarantee their little dog would walk again, Shirah and her husband would not know whether the surgery was successful before they initiated a long process of rehabilitation.

"I haven't talked through this in so long, and it still



Little Tank had an accident that led to a broken back, but thanks to surgery, some therapy and a loving home, he's almost as good as new.

brings up emotion," Shirah said. "I cried a lot. It was very stressful. But Tank and I were so determined, so committed. Ever since then, I've felt a kindred spirit with him."

For months, Shirah spent her nights on the floor next to her little Cavapoo, trying to get some sleep yet lying awake, keeping watch over her patient while knowing there were no guarantees he would walk again. She began searching online in the night for wheels for him.

Deeply devoted

Meanwhile, Tank began his arduous rehabilitation process. It started with a sling Shirah would use to take the weight off his back legs, lowering it just enough for him to touch the ground. This made it possible for him to "remind" his brain and body how it would feel to walk again.

His therapist also set down a little rubber peanut-shaped object, which Tank would push back and forth with his paw to strengthen muscles and dexterity.

"Then he graduated to water therapy," Shirah said. "They would put him in a tank with a treadmill in it. Then they'd add water and turn on the treadmill, enabling him to

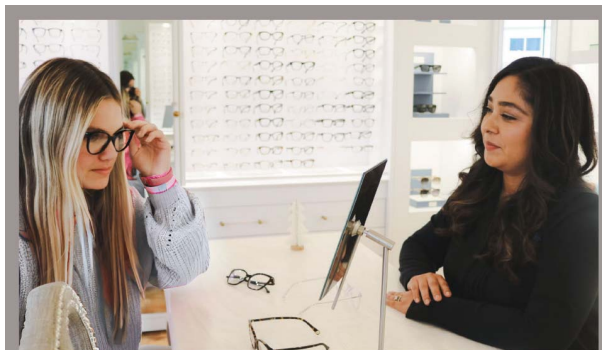
walk without pressure. It was amazing to witness."

But Tank wasn't wild about walking in water. He would look through the glass at his person, hoping, she believed, that she'd rescue him. That meant she had to leave the room to avoid being a distraction. It was hard on both of them.

Since he's food-motivated, Tank's physical therapist often used little pieces of salmon as incentives. One day, during therapy, Shirah saw Tank's tail start to move for the first time since the accident. The therapist said it meant his nerves were starting to fire again. Then he wobbled over to nibble the salmon. He was on the road to recovery.

Three years later, Tank might have a slight waddle to his walk, Shirah said, and she puts drops in his eye to mitigate lingering nerve damage from the accident. But other than that, she said, people who don't know the story can't tell that Tank went through trauma.

"Dogs teach us so much about strength, resilience, and recovery," said Shirah, now a resident of Carmel. "Ever since the accident, he's been my dog, my soul. I call him my heartbeat at my feet."



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who possesses 30 years of experience as an esthetician, and a luminous calm about her — aren't easy to come by.

"Monterey is a small region, and it's been a challenge to find beauty professionals who are interested in volunteering in a clinical setting and who fit the qualifications," Holiber said.

"It's hard, because so many people eager about beauty and skincare reach out. But our volunteers must be licensed estheticians, though we'll accept makeup artists with equivalent professional experience," she added — not to mention background checks and the like.



Madeleine Cooper

Cooper was an ideal candidate. She had trained and started her esthetician career in London before she and her husband relocated to San Francisco Bay area in the early 1990s. She helped launch a skincare brand and opened her own clinic, Skincare by Madeleine, after operating for several years within a medical spa.

"I spent most of my career in the medical spa world working under dermatologists, offering injectables, lasers — heavy-duty treatments for deep wrinkles, pigmentation and acne," Cooper explained.

After moving to this area in 2017, she helped a friend to establish a spa in Carmel Valley. Cooper also returned to school online, taking an intensive course in oncology esthetics.

Different skin

"Cancer is everywhere, and over the years I'd had a lot of clients going through treatments. And there's a point at which you realize, 'Oh, this is very different skin now,'" she said.

Before joining the fleet of Lipstick Angels in 2023, Cooper enrolled in the group's mandatory oncology esthetics course. It covers the basics of chemotherapy and radiation, focusing on how treatment impacts hair loss,



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skin sensitivity, even the quality of a person's fingernails.

"We're dealing with people who have lost their lashes and brows, and most are experiencing extreme dryness and dehydration. Skin is skin — we even offer a scalp massage and treatment to help with redness and flakiness," Cooper explained.

Another common side effect is light sensitivity. Sun exposure — in fact, any light exposure — can seriously aggravate skin during cancer treatment, and radiation therapy often results in burns from prolonged exposure. It's understandable that some patients don't want to be touched, and Cooper offers aromatherapy and guided breathing sessions to provide relief without physical contact. Patients can take those techniques with them — and, if they like, a nice moisturizer or lipstick.

"If they're out shopping at Sephora or Macy's, I can show them the ingredients to look for and what to avoid. There are so many options, it can really be daunting,"

Cooper said, noting that cancer treatment often makes skin more sensitive to commonly used and typically safe chemicals. Lipstick Angels has given more than 30,000 nontoxic products to patients through partnerships with skincare and makeup companies.

Cooper also hosts a monthly beauty and wellness seminar at CHOMP, setting up stations with suitable makeup products and a mirror. Patients can drop in to pick up professional-grade tips: how to pencil in sparse eyebrows, or where to apply blush to a face that may now have a very different shape. Or, they can wait for a one-on-one appointment, though it's smart to schedule in advance — Cooper is quite popular.

"I put out my calendar the last week of each month, and it always makes me smile when people schedule their infusion treatment during the hours of my visit. Sometimes, they'll get me, a therapy dog, and a musician all at once!" Cooper said.

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you can do. Causes of these ailments may be unknown, genetic, or come with the passage of the time.

Among the other conditions Geisler treats is vestibular neuritis, which she said is caused by inflammation of the nerve in the inner ear. "It can be preceded by a viral infection and can cause acute dizziness, nausea and imbalance," and can be treated with steroids and a series of physical therapy sessions.

"Another thing that is common with age is a weakening of the inner ear. We lose strength in that system, which can result in dizziness, difficulty walking in the dark, and feeling off balance when you turn around," Geisler said. It can be treated with targeted exercise and strength and balance training.

Finally, Geisler cautioned, "Not all dizziness and vertigo are the same and not all dizziness issues are caused by loose crystals."

She emphasized that while dizziness is common, it is not normal. If you experience it — be it associated with movement or randomly — get it evaluated and find the cause so you can get safely back on your feet.

You can learn more about Geisler's work at monterey-mobile.com.



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