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Vestibular Exercises

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How Do Vestibular Exercises Work?

The purpose of these exercises is to improve your brain's compensation for injuries or abnormalities within the vestibular (balance) system. Dizziness can be caused by many different problems within the brain, balance organ or peripheral nervous system. Regardless of the exact site of the problem, the brain must be retrained to compensate for the problem. Vestibular exercises merely stimulate the vestibular apparatus (balance organ). Just like everything in life, practice makes perfect.

These exercises do not work overnight, but with time they will improve virtually all dizziness problems. You should feel some dizziness when performing these exercises, this means they are working. The more dizziness you feel, the more work you will need on that exercise. You need to remain safe and avoid falls, but continue the exercises, especially the ones that make you feel dizzy. Avoiding those exercises will only prolong your recovery.

Tai Chi is an ancient Chinese art which is great exercise for the mind and body. It has been proven to improve balance problems. Yoga may also be beneficial for balance problems.

When you begin:

During the first few times the exercise is performed, you should have another person present in case the dizziness becomes very severe. ***These exercises may make you dizzy, and could contribute towards a fall. Pay attention to your safety, and take all of the precautions mentioned above. When you perform these exercises, you do so at your own risk.***

When should you stop doing the exercises?

These exercises should be done at least twice a day for a minimum of 6 to 12 weeks or until the dizziness goes away altogether. Stopping before complete resolution of dizziness often results in a relapse in symptoms. The point at which one stops the exercises is when one has no dizziness for two consecutive weeks. The exercise may be stopped and restarted again at any time if dizziness returns.

The exercises are designed to challenge your balance system and often cause symptoms of dizziness. This is a normal response to these stimulating exercise. You should try to work through these symptoms if possible. However, always use common sense: Do not allow yourself to become so dizzy you risk a fall and do not perform the standing exercises until you can do so safely. If you feel you cannot do these exercises safely, call our office and we will try and set up a physical therapy consultation for assistance.

Remember, these exercises demand full concentration, so avoid distractions. Start all exercises with an eye for safety: Begin exercises should be performed next to a counter, table, wall or other stable object or with someone nearby.

If possible, in addition to the exercises below, begin a walking program at home. You should walk 5 days a week. Start by walking for 5 minutes. Increase the length of walking time by 5 minutes each week until you can walk for 30 minutes continuously.

Head Exercises

1. Bending: In a sitting position, bend your head down to look at the floor then up to look at the ceiling. Lead your head with your eyes focusing on the floor and the ceiling.

- Repeat this 10 times. Stop and wait for symptoms to resolve, about 30 seconds.
- Repeat entire process 2 more times.

2. Turning (side to side): In a sitting position, turn your head to the right and then left, leading your head with your eyes as if you are watching a tennis match.

- Turn your head at a speed brisk enough to generate symptoms but not so fast that you strain your neck. (Slowly first, then quickly)
- Go back and forth 10 times, and then wait for 30 seconds (or until symptoms resolve).
- Repeat entire process 2 more times.

3. Head Rolls: In a sitting position, roll your head in a circle clockwise, then counterclockwise. This start with your chin on your chest, roll your head so your right ear is near your right shoulder, continue rolling so you are looking at the ceiling, etc.

- Go clockwise 5 times, wait for 30 seconds (or until symptoms resolve), and repeat counterclockwise.
- Repeat entire process 2 more times

As the dizziness improves:

- Perform head exercises with eyes closed.
- Progress to standing while performing head exercises.
 - As you start doing this on your feet, start with your feet shoulder width apart, in a corner or near a stable object you can hold onto in case of dizziness.
 - The closer together you put your feet, the more challenging it becomes.

Exercises Done While Sitting

1. Shrug shoulders up and down: 20 times.
2. Turn shoulders to right and then to left: 20 times.

3. Bend forward and pick up objects from ground and sit up: 20 times.

Exercises Done While Standing

1. Change from sitting to standing and back again

- 20 times with eyes open.
- Repeat with eyes closed.
- Start nearby a wall, table, walker or other stable object for support if necessary.

2. Standing with one foot in front of the other.

In a corner, practice standing "heel to toe" (One foot in front of the other with the heel of one foot touching the toe of the other foot) with eyes open for 30 seconds. The goal is to stand for the entire 30 seconds without touching the wall. You may make this more challenging by crossing arms across chest. If this is too hard at first, try standing "almost heel to toe" (with feet touching at big toes and ankles). Once you have mastered these with eyes open, practice with eyes closed.

3. Standing on a cushion:

In a corner, stand on a couch cushion or several pillows. Try to stand still without touching the wall for 30 seconds. Practice with eyes open. When this is easy, practice with eyes closed. You may make this more challenging by placing feet closer together. Crossing arm across your chest also makes this more challenging. You should progress by performing this in the most challenging position possible.

Walking

1. Walking on a straight line: In a hallway or next to a wall, practice walking on a straight line for 5 minutes with one foot in front of the other or " Heel to Toe " (with the heel of one foot touching the toe of the other foot). If this is too hard at first, practice walking "almost heel to toe" and gradually work to heel to toe touching.

2. Walking combined with head turning: In a hallway or open space, practice walking in a straight line while turning head and eyes left and right with every other step. (i.e. when you step with your left you look left, when you step with your right you look right". Continue for the length of the hallway or about 20 feet. Repeat the process 3 times. Now repeat the entire process 3 more times but this time looking at the ceiling or floor. You will need to rest between repetitions and let symptoms calm.

Lying Down

Sitting on side of bed, quickly lie down to your left side

- Swinging your feet onto the bed as you do.
- Lie there for 30 seconds or until symptoms resolve.

- Repeat 3 times.
- Now repeat 3 times to the right.

Eye Exercises

Gaze Stabilization

Keep eyes fixed on a single stationary target (playing card or pencil) held in hand or placed on a wall 10 feet away. Now move head side to side for 10 seconds. Repeat 3 times. Now repeat 3 times while moving head up and down for 10 seconds. Do 2-3 sessions per day. You may progress this by beginning in a sitting position then move to standing with feet apart, standing with feet together, standing heel to toe, marching in place, or standing on foam. This will also be more difficult if object you are focusing on is placed on a "busy wallpaper" or a checkerboard.

Smooth pursuit: Holding a single target (playing card or pencil), keep eyes fixed on target. Slowly move it side to side for 10 seconds while head stays still. Perform in the sitting position. Progress to the standing position as tolerated. Now repeat moving head up and down. Repeat 3 times in each direction per session. Do 2-3 sessions per day.

Head and eyes same direction: Holding a single target (playing card or pencil) keep eyes fixed on target. Slowly move target, head and eyes in same direction. (Up and down) (Side to side) for 10 seconds. Perform in sitting position, you can progress this to standing as you improve. Repeat 3 times per session. This will be more difficult if you have a "background" of a busy wallpaper. Do 2-3 sessions per day.

Head and eyes opposite direction: Holding your target, keep your eyes focused on it and begin to slowly move target (up/down) (side to side) while moving your head in the opposite direction of the target for 10 seconds. Repeat 3 times per session. You may progress from sitting to standing as in above exercise. Do 2-3 sessions per day.

Eye exercise tips:

Target must remain in focus, not blurry and appear stationary while head is in motion.

Perform exercise with small head movement (45 degrees on either side)

Speed of head motion should be increased as long as target remains in focus.

If you use glasses, wear them while performing exercises.

These exercises may provoke dizziness or nausea. Try to work through these symptoms.

Rest between each exercise.

If you have any questions concerning therapy, please call.

Reminder: These exercises may make you dizzy, and could contribute towards a fall. Pay attention to your safety, and take all of the precautions mentioned above. When you perform these exercises, you do so at your own risk.