

Benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV)

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What is benign paroxysmal positional vertigo?

Benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV) is a common cause of dizziness. It can occur in all ages of people but more commonly arises in people over the age of 50. It causes short intense spells of dizziness when the body or head is placed in certain positions such as turning over in bed and looking up. People can feel sick when they experience this dizziness and can feel unsteady for a few hours afterwards.

Benign – this means the cause is not a threat to your health

Paroxysmal – this means the dizziness comes in short spells

Positional – this means the dizziness is provoked by certain head or body positions

Vertigo – this is the medical name given to the spinning sensation you get when you feel dizzy

What causes BPPV?

There are a collection of tiny calcium crystals in the inner part of your ear. These have a valuable role to play when they are in the correct position and part of your inner ear. BPPV occurs when these crystals become dislodged from their correct position. They can move into one or more of the semicircular canals and either continue to float around or can become attached in this canal.

When you place your head in certain positions these crystals move, making your brain think you are moving even though you are not. This causes your eyes to move in a certain way. If you stay in this position the crystals will settle and the dizziness will usually disappear after a minute or so.

The crystals can become dislodged from their normal position for a number of reasons. These include after a head injury or inner ear infection, although it can often happen for no apparent reason at all. BPPV normally occurs in just one ear but can occur in both ears at the same time.

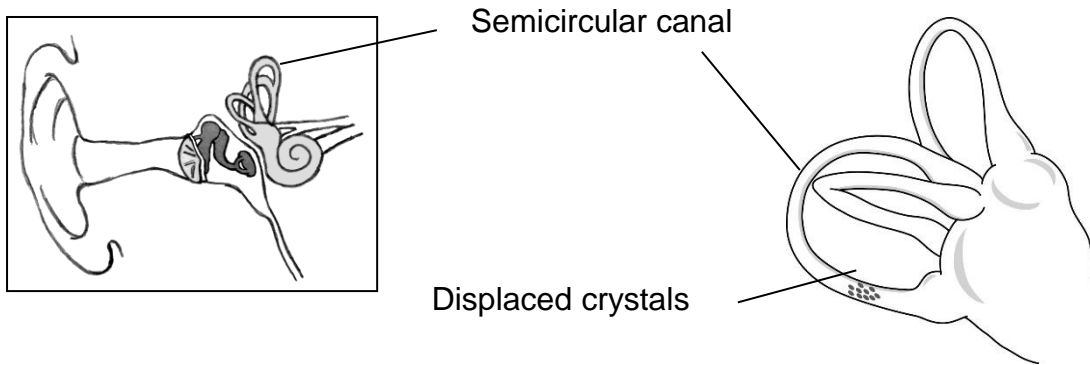


Diagram showing displaced calcium crystals in the inner ear.

How is it diagnosed?

The description of your dizzy symptoms is particularly helpful in diagnosing this condition. There is also a test called the Dix-Hallpike Manoeuvre, which can assess if you are suffering with BPPV and which ear is affected. This is done by asking you to lie down from a seated position with your head turned to one side. You will be assisted by an audiologist to do this. This can recreate your symptoms of feeling dizzy and should pass after a minute or so.

How is it treated?

BPPV can clear up spontaneously after a few weeks or even months without treatment. If it persists, then a safe, simple and effective exercise can be performed. This exercise may need to be repeated several times to be fully effective and for you to become completely symptom-free.

By completing a series of slow and controlled movements of your head and body, the crystals can be moved back to their correct position. This will be done in the clinic with a specialist audiologist.

What happens after the treatment?

Some people can feel dizzy or off-balance after the treatment. This can last for up to 48 hours. Following this you should start to feel little or even no dizziness when in positions that used to make you feel dizzy before.

We will give you a modified version of this exercise to do at home, which will aim to resolve your dizzy symptoms completely.

What is the expected outcome of treatment?

Treatment is normally very effective, especially if the exercises are performed by you at home diligently. However, BPPV can be known to reoccur in some cases after a few months or even a few years but will more than likely be treated with the same exercise.

Follow-up

We will make a routine follow-up appointment 3 to 4 weeks after treatment to review your symptoms. In the meantime you will be asked to perform the home exercises to help your symptoms further.

More information

For further information, call the audiology department on 01271 322476.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

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