

# Vertigo and Preventing Falls Among Seniors

Understand vertigo to help avoid falls among seniors.

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one third of seniors over age 65 fall each year. Falling is the leading cause of injury-related death for seniors and broken bones from falling can lead to a loss of independence. A recent study published in the journal *Age and Ageing* reports that dizziness is a common cause of falling, that seniors with vertigo are the most likely to fall and that many of these falls among seniors can be prevented by recognizing and treating vertigo.

*“Dizziness is one of the most common symptoms described by older people and is associated with balance disorders, functional decline, reduction in quality of life and falls.” - Age and Ageing*

## Dizziness, Vertigo and Imbalance

Feeling unsteady on your feet, lightheaded or a false sense of movement are all common complaints in seniors. These dizziness symptoms affect a majority of seniors over the age of 70. One-third of seniors between the ages of 65 and 75 report that feeling dizzy or unsteady is a major concern that diminishes their quality of life.

## Common Causes of Dizziness in the Elderly

The first thing you need to know is that not all dizziness symptoms are the same. Vertigo is the term that doctors use to identify the type of dizziness that causes you to feel like you, or the room around you, is actually moving or spinning. This is important because vertigo is the most common type of dizziness that occurs with increasing age, the most likely to cause a fall and a type of dizziness that can often be treated.

- **Positional vertigo.** This condition is caused by an abnormality in the inner ear. It may also be called benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV). The main symptom of BPPV is a sudden onset of spinning type vertigo when you move your head. You might notice it turning over in bed or looking up to get something off a shelf. Although these bouts of vertigo are brief, they are severe and disturbing. The good news is that BPPV can be treated with medications and with special types of exercises.
- **Meniere’s disease.** This cause of dizziness is also treatable and increases with age. The National Institutes of Health estimates that over half a million Americans suffer from Meniere’s disease. Symptoms of Meniere’s disease include bouts of vertigo combined with hearing loss and ringing in a single ear. Meniere’s disease is caused by a fluid imbalance in the inner ear and can be treated with diet and medications.
- **Vestibular neuritis.** This cause of dizziness is also due to an inner ear abnormality and it may be more serious in seniors. The symptoms are vertigo that is present with movement and while resting, nausea and abnormal back-and-forth eye movements called nystagmus. Vestibular neuritis goes away on its own over time although it may last longer in seniors.
- **Central dizziness.** This is a type of dizziness that is caused by a disturbance in the central nervous system, usually by an interruption of blood flow to a part of the brain. Symptoms of dizziness are usually accompanied by loss of muscle coordination called ataxia and by nausea. This type of dizziness is actually less common in seniors than in those of middle age.
- **Medical dizziness.** This type of dizziness is more likely to be described as feeling lightheaded or disoriented. Medical dizziness can cause a brief loss of consciousness called syncope. Side effects from medications, heart problems and diabetes can all result in medical dizziness. Side effects from a senior’s medications are most likely to cause orthostatic hypotension, which can make you feel dizzy when you stand up or get out of bed.

All types of dizziness, and especially the type of dizziness called vertigo, can contribute to falls in seniors. The most important thing to know is that dizziness, vertigo and imbalance are not a normal part of aging and that treatment is available. You don't need to live in fear of falling.

## Special Warning Signs For Caregivers

Some symptoms that may be seen with dizziness demand immediate attention. If you are a senior caregiver and you note any of the following symptoms along with dizziness, you need to treat it as a medical emergency:

- High fever, severe headache or stiff neck
- Convulsions or vomiting
- Head trauma
- Loss of consciousness
- Sudden weakness or inability to move an arm or leg
- Chest pain or shortness of breath

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FOR MORE INFORMATION REGARDING VERTIGO, ITS SYMPTOMS AND TREATMENTS, CONSULT YOUR PERSONAL PHYSICIAN.

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### OTHER LINKS:

**MAYO CLINIC: Fall prevention: Simple tips to prevent falls**

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/healthy-aging/in-depth/fall-prevention/art-20047358>

**NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF HEALTH: How Can Older Adults Prevent Falls?**

<https://medlineplus.gov/magazine/issues/winter14/articles/winter14pg15.html>

**WEB MD: Dizziness: Lightheadedness and Vertigo - Prevention**

<https://www.webmd.com/brain/tc/dizziness-lightheadedness-and-vertigo-prevention>