

Patient information from BMJ

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Labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis

Labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis are infections of the inner ear. Although they are different conditions, they have similar symptoms. They can cause nausea and vomiting, dizziness, and vertigo. Vertigo is the feeling you, or the environment around you, are spinning.

Labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis can usually be treated easily with few or no long-term effects. You can use our information to talk to your doctor about the best treatments for you.

What are labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis?

Labyrinthitis is an infection of the **inner ear**. This part of the ear plays an important part in balance and hearing. So swelling in this area can cause hearing loss, and make you feel dizzy and unsteady.

Vestibular neuritis is an infection of the **vestibular nerve**. This nerve sends information from the inner ear to the brain. Swelling in this area can cause dizziness, nausea, and vomiting.

What causes labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis?

Labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis usually happen after someone has had a **viral infection**. **Viral labyrinthitis** is the most common type of labyrinthitis and the easiest to treat. It's sometimes called **serous labyrinthitis**. It often happens after you have had an infection of the upper airways (chest or throat).

Bacterial infections are another cause of labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis, although they are much less common than the viral kind. With bacterial **labyrinthitis** (also called **suppurative labyrinthitis**) the hearing loss is typically permanent.

Other, rarer, causes of labyrinthitis include meningitis, syphilis, and HIV.

What are the symptoms of labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis?

The main symptoms of labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis are:

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- vertigo. This means that you feel dizzy, as if everything around you is spinning. People with labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis often struggle to walk in a straight line
- nausea and vomiting
- problems with balance.

Labyrinthitis may also cause hearing loss, which is often on one side only. It can also cause tinnitus. Tinnitus is when you hear something that isn't there. This could be a ringing, humming, or buzzing sound.

If your doctor thinks that you might have labyrinthitis or vestibular neuritis they will probably ask you questions about your symptoms.

- Can you describe your dizziness? Does the room spin, or is it more like floating or being light headed?
- What happened during your first episode of vertigo? How long did it last?
- How long do your dizzy spells last?
- Have you ever had dizzy spells or vertigo before?
- Do you have any other symptoms apart from dizziness: for example, hearing loss, ringing in your ears, or a feeling of fullness in your ears?
- What makes your dizziness better or worse?
- Have you recently had an upper respiratory tract infection (chest or throat infection)?

Your doctor may also ask you questions about any recent medication or history of headaches and migraines, to make sure the dizziness is not being caused by anything else.

Your doctor might also suggest some tests to check how severe your vertigo and any hearing loss are.

What are the treatment options for labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis?

Viral labyrinthitis and **vestibular neuritis** are usually treated with medicines that help to relieve the symptoms. For example:

- **Vertigo** can be treated with medicines called **anti-emetics or vestibular suppressants**. Some of these can cause side effects, so you will usually only be given them for short periods. Your doctor should discuss any possible side effects with you. Most people find that vertigo symptoms get better within about three days.
- **Nausea** can be treated with **anti-emetics**. These medicines help to reduce the feeling of nausea. You may also need to have fluids given directly into a vein if you have been vomiting a lot, because vomiting can make you dehydrated.
- **Hearing loss**, if it occurs, can be treated with a short course of **corticosteroid** tablets. **Corticosteroids** are powerful anti-inflammatories, which help to reduce the inflammation (swelling) in your inner ear so that you can hear properly again. These

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drugs can cause side effects in some people, but these usually only happen when you take them for a long time. Your doctor should explain the possible side effects to you.

Bacterial labyrinthitis can be treated with the same medicines as viral labyrinthitis. But you will also need treatment with **antibiotics** to kill the bacterial infection.

If your labyrinthitis has been caused by another type of infection such as meningitis, syphilis, or HIV, you will receive specialist treatment and care.

Rehabilitation for persistent vertigo

Vertigo symptoms usually clear up within a few days. But some people find that they take much longer to go away, or that they don't seem to go away at all.

For these people, **vestibular rehabilitation** can often help. This rehabilitation can involve:

- exercises to help with dizziness, nausea, and anxiety
- balance training exercises (if balance is also affected).

What happens next?

Most people with viral labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis recover well. People who experience hearing loss from viral labyrinthitis or vestibular neuritis will usually regain their hearing.

But recovery from bacterial labyrinthitis, and from labyrinthitis caused by meningitis, can be more difficult. For example, even with treatment, the hearing loss caused by bacterial labyrinthitis may be permanent.

Some people don't recover well from **tinnitus**. Tinnitus might sound like a minor complaint, but it can be extremely stressful. Some people find that it affects their quality of life and leads to depression. If you struggle with tinnitus, talk to your doctor. There are many treatments for tinnitus, and your doctor can help you find what works best for you.

Some people with viral labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis find that they have repeat episodes of **vertigo**. If this happens, talk to your doctor, as you may need more treatment.

There are various support groups and charities that help people affected by labyrinthitis.

Your doctor might be able to help you find a group near you, or you could easily search online.

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