


HEALTH

When the World Spins

Vertigo is surprisingly common. Here's how to handle it

BY *Karen Robock*

ONE MORNING LAST winter, Lynn Smith was doing a series of gentle stretches on a mat in her living room, trying to loosen up a stiff lower back. When the 56-year-old sat up, she felt a bit strange. "I started to feel dizzy in a way I had not felt before," she says. Then, when she got into bed that night, she felt as if the room was spinning around her. She went to her doctor, who put a name to her experiences: vertigo.

While it's often described as a sensation of motion, vertigo is more complex

than a dizzy spell. People can experience ringing in the ears, loss of balance, double vision and trouble swallowing, depending on what's causing the vertigo. Episodes can last anywhere from a few minutes to a few days.

Although it can affect people of all ages, vertigo is most common in mid-life and beyond and is more prevalent in women, though experts don't fully understand why, says Terry Fife, a neurologist at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix, who specializes in balance disorders.

It's important to understand that vertigo is not a disease in itself. It's a symptom. There are many reasons why someone may have vertigo, but it generally falls into one of two types: peripheral vertigo and central vertigo.

With peripheral vertigo, the most common cause is benign paroxysmal positional vertigo, or BPPV. It develops when canaliths (tiny crystal-like calcium particles) that naturally occur inside the ear become loose and move deeper into the inner-ear canals. As they roll around, they can disrupt the transmission of information to the brain about balance. That's why the sensation that the room is spinning can strike when someone leans back to look up into a high kitchen cupboard, bends over to tie a shoe—or, as Smith discovered, folds over in a yoga pose. Less common causes are a head injury or Ménière's disease, a rare inner-ear condition.

Central vertigo is less common and

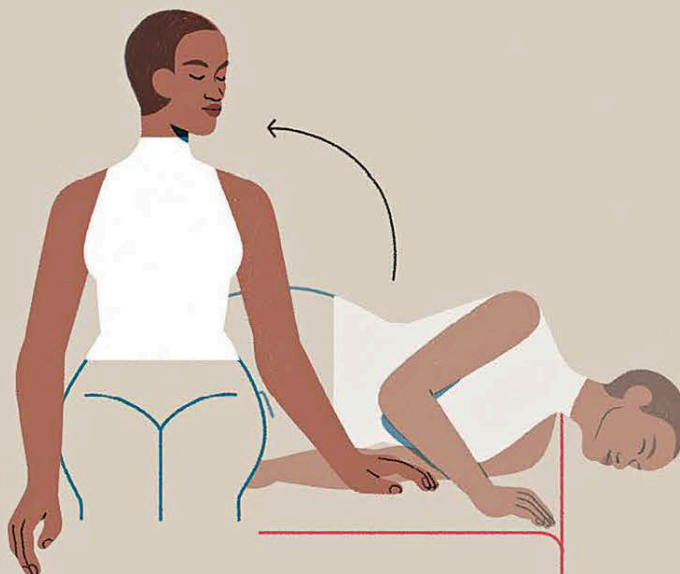
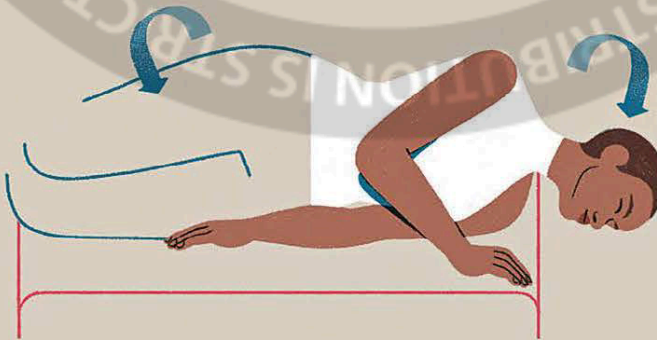
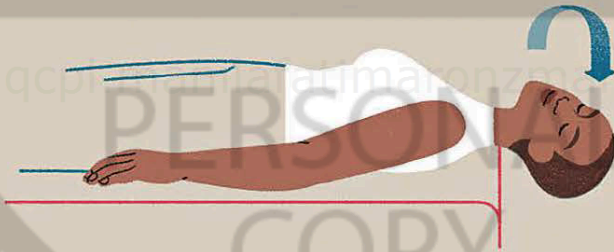
occurs in people who are experiencing a problem with the central nervous system, such as vestibular migraines (a type of migraine defined by extreme dizziness) or stroke.

A primary care physician may refer a patient to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist, or suggest a neurologist or a cardiologist. "That's why getting the diagnosis right is especially important," says Dr Fife.

BPPV will often resolve itself in a few weeks or months, but rather than waiting, patients can try at-home exercises to wiggle the ear crystals back into position. The Epley manoeuvre, which worked for Smith, is the most well-known. (See page 28.) According to a 2023 study published in the journal *Medicine*, it improved symptoms of vertigo in 98 per cent of patients. It can also be done preventively, as Smith's neurologist recommended. An over-the-counter drug, meclizine, which is commonly used for motion sickness, can help quell symptoms when they strike.

Smith's neurologist also recommended she avoid alcohol, sugar and caffeine, as they could potentially trigger episodes of vertigo. Stress and inadequate sleep are other possible triggers.

"Feeling the room spin was terrifying," says Smith. As she shared her experience with others, she was surprised at how many said they too had experienced vertigo. "This is not some obscure medical condition," she says. "It's more common than you think." **R**



At-Home Treatment

For the most common cause of vertigo, BPPV, your doctor may suggest the Epley manoeuvre. Perform each step in order, holding each position for 30 to 60 seconds.

1. Sit on your bed. Turn your head 45 degrees toward the affected ear. (If you get dizzy when you roll your head to the right, it's likely your right ear.)
 2. Keeping your head turned, lie back so your head hangs off the bed.
 3. Slowly turn your head 90 degrees toward the other side.
 4. Roll onto your side in the direction you're looking, then turn your head so you're looking down.
 5. Sit upright, keeping your head turned.
- TIP:** If you can, have someone with you for support as you will likely experience vertigo.