

# Dizziness related to anxiety and stress

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## FACT SHEET



Vestibular Rehabilitation  
Special Interest Group



### *Why does anxiety and stress cause me to be dizzy?*

Dizziness is a common symptom of anxiety stress and, and If one is experiencing anxiety, dizziness can result. On the other hand dizziness can be anxiety-producing. The vestibular system is responsible for sensing body position and movement in our surroundings. The vestibular system is made up of an inner ear on each side, specific areas of the brain, and the nerves that connect them. This system is responsible for the sense of dizziness when things go wrong. Scientists believe that the areas in the brain responsible for dizziness interact with the areas responsible for anxiety, and cause both symptoms.

The dizziness that accompanies anxiety is often described as a sense of light-headedness or wooziness. There may be a feeling of motion or spinning inside rather than in the environment. Sometimes there is a sense of swaying even though you are standing still. Environments like grocery stores, crowded malls or wide open spaces may cause a sense of imbalance and disequilibrium. These symptoms are caused by legitimate physiologic changes within the brain.

If there is an abnormality in the vestibular system, the symptom of dizziness can be the result. If one already has a tendency toward anxiety, dizziness from the vestibular system and anxiety can interact, making symptoms worse. Often the anxiety and the dizziness must be treated together in order for improvement to be made.

### *How does physical therapy help?*

Scientists are starting to better understand how dizziness and stress/anxiety are related, and some ideas about treatment have been developed. Physical therapists are working with patients that have anxiety and dizziness with good success.

The therapy focuses on making the vestibular system work as well as it can, and working through symptoms of dizziness in anxiety-producing environments. Patients develop skills in managing dizziness and learning to be able to control symptoms through pacing. Pacing is doing symptom-provoking activities in small doses with rest in between, so that your symptoms do not get out of control. By understanding better how the vestibular system works and what situations or movements may cause your symptoms, you will learn to manage your situation much better.



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## *Is there anything else that can be done?*

The anxiety component of the problem may need medical treatment. Most interventions for anxiety involve psychological counseling, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and medication. A physician may recommend a limited use of medications in order to control the anxiety in order to achieve the best benefits of physical therapy.

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