

Labyrinthitis

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Fact Sheet

What is labyrinthitis?

Labyrinthitis is an infection or inflammation of the hearing and balance portion of your inner ear called the labyrinth. It occurs when the labyrinth or nerve that goes to your inner ear gets infected by a virus or bacteria. Symptoms of labyrinthitis are sudden hearing loss in one ear, vertigo (a sensation of spinning) and poor balance. Symptoms from damage to the inner ear can range from mild to severe. Typically, after the first few days the constant vertigo changes into dizziness and imbalance with head movements or position changes. It is important to see a physician as soon as possible if you have a sudden hearing loss. Treatment with steroids may help improve the hearing loss if started within the first two weeks.

What can I do about my labyrinthitis?

Recovery is gradual over several weeks, and physical therapy can help you get better faster. To use the information from your inner ears for balance, your brain needs both ears to work well with each other. If one side is not working well from an infection or damage to the nerve, your brain will need to learn how to interpret the information. Your physical therapist can give you exercises to help adjust for the changes to your inner ear. The exercises are very effective and it is normal to have dizziness while you are doing your exercises. Your physical therapist will create a special balance and exercise program specifically for you.

It is common to see your physical therapist one time a week at first to determine which exercises are appropriate, how well you tolerate them, and how to change them over time. Performing the exercises at home three to five times per day is very important to allow the brain to readjust and the symptoms to improve and eventually go away. It is normal to have an increase in symptoms when you first begin your exercises. Soon, your brain will accommodate to the movement and your symptoms will improve. Research suggests that it can take six to eight weeks for the brain to readjust to a damaged vestibular nerve. Once your body has adjusted to the damaged nerve, many people do not feel symptoms anymore, and can discontinue the exercises. In some cases, it may take longer for symptoms to improve or minor symptoms may remain. Each individual responds differently, and your recovery will depend upon the amount of nerve damage, the length of time you have been living with your symptoms, your age, and your activity level among other factors.

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