

# Mal de Debarquement

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## FACT SHEET



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Special Interest Group



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## Mal de Debarquement (MDDS)

### *What is MDDS?*

Individuals with MDDS complain of dizziness and imbalance after returning from being on a prolonged voyage, such as after taking a cruise (also can occur with long plane or car rides).

#### Symptoms:

- Dizzy and off balance once back “on land”
- “Rocking” or “swaying” sensation
- Lasts weeks to months (years in rare severe cases)

Causes: Though it is not known for certain, several theories do exist on the cause of MDDS.

- Vestibular (balance) system in inner ear does not adjust once back on land
- Form of migraine syndrome
- Heredity / Hormonal cause (occurs more often in women than men)
- Inability to disregard our body’s reactions that were developed to prevent fall-

### *How do I know that I have MDDS?*

A person is diagnosed with MDDS by ruling out other causes of dizziness and unsteadiness. The onset of dizziness is usually associated with recent prolonged travel. It differs from motion sickness because people with MDDS are usually symptom free during the cruise or flight. Some people with MDDS say that their symptoms are less bothersome when they board a ship again.

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## ***What type of treatment is there for MDDS?***

There is no standard treatment to eliminate the dizziness and imbalance due to MDDS. Medication (certain antidepressants, seizure or anxiety medications) has sometimes been helpful as part of the treatment. Very small amounts of anxiety medicines taken before getting on and during a cruise or a flight may prevent the symptoms of MDDS. Other medicines like meclizine & scopolamine, which are typically used to treat other forms of dizziness, generally have not been helpful in reducing the dizziness symptoms in patients with MDDS. Treatments aimed at teaching the person to “ignore” their body’s abnormal reaction to movement are gaining in popularity.

## ***How can physical therapy help my symptoms due to MDDS?***

While there remains to be conclusive evidence that Physical Therapy can help with MDDS, the dizziness and imbalance caused by *motion sickness* has been successfully treated by habituation and substitution exercises. Habituation exercises require doing repetitions of dizziness-provoking movements. Substitution exercises help with balance by teaching the body to improve its use of internal balance systems (vision, touch/pressure, and vestibular).

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