What is Unilateral Vestibular Hypofunction (UVH)?

A diagnosis of unilateral vestibular hypofunction is made when the balance system in your inner ear, the peripheral vestibular system, is not working properly. There is a vestibular system in both inner ears, so unilateral means that only one system is impaired, while the other is working normally. This can help greatly in the recovery process!

What might cause a UVH?

- Vestibular neuronitis or labyrinthitis is a viral or bacterial infection that attacks the nerve that connects to your inner ear
- Weakness of the structures of the inner ear due to aging
- Toxic reaction to medications
- Blood clots, tumors, or brain injury that impacts the inner ear structures
- Sometimes the exact cause may be unknown

What are the common symptoms related to UVH?

Symptoms of UVH will depend on the cause of the problem. Symptoms can come on suddenly or slowly, can be mild or severe, or may last for a few days or even weeks. The most common symptoms include:

- Dizziness or vertigo (described as a spinning sensation)
- Poor balance, especially with head turns
- Trouble walking, especially outdoors, in dark rooms, or in crowded places
- Blurred vision, especially when turning your head quickly
- Nausea and vomiting in acute and severe cases

How can physical therapy help?

A physical therapist (PT) can help relieve the symptoms of UVH and promote a faster recovery. A PT will do an individual and complete examination of your peripheral vestibular system. This will include tests of your visual system, balance, walking, and activities at home or work that you are having trouble with.

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What exercises can help relieve the symptoms?

PTs design exercises to help the recovery of the peripheral vestibular system. Exercises that you may be asked to perform include:

- Gaze stabilization exercise to help improve the coordination of head and eye movements
- Special balance exercises to incorporate and strengthen your inner ear balance system
- Walking exercises to improve balance in challenging environments like walking outdoors, walking on uneven surfaces, walking in dark rooms, and walking in crowded places

Education about the cause of UVH for each person, and things to do at home to decrease symptoms and improve daily activities are also important parts of physical therapy.