

Mal de Debarquement

FACT SHEET



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Mal de Debarquement (MDDS)

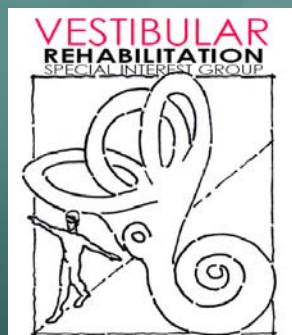
What is MDDS?

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 plane or car rides). Frequently, people who get MDDS will feel fine on the ship, but once they get onto land, they will feel dizzy and off-balance. The dizziness is described as a rocking or swaying feeling like they are still on the ship. It can be normal for people to feel this way for a few hours or days after getting off the ship, however, people with MDDS complain of symptoms that last for weeks to months to years. Most people with MDDS have symptoms for a month or less.

Though it is not known for certain, several theories do exist on the cause of MDDS. One possibility is that the vestibular (balance) system located in the inner ear gets used to the continuous motion from the ship. After getting off of the ship, the vestibular system cannot readjust to being on land (a firm, stable surface) and the dizziness symptoms begin. Another possible theory for MDDS is that it is caused by an unusual form of migraine. This theory would help explain why MDDS occurs mostly in women. Heredity has also been thought of as a possible cause of MDDS.

How do I know that I have MDDS?

A person is diagnosed with MDDS by ruling out other causes of dizziness and unsteadiness. With MDDS, people usually describes a fairly constant feeling of motion, like rocking or swaying, rather than a sensation of spinning. 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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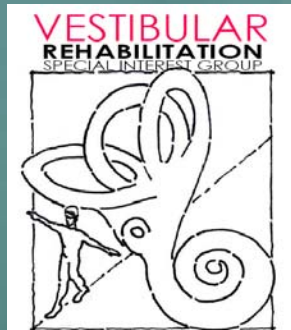
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What type of treatment is there for MDDS?

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. Exercises designed to reduce symptoms may also be helpful.

How can physical therapy help my symptoms due to MDDS?

The types of exercises used to reduce dizziness symptoms and improve balance are called habituation and substitution exercises. Habituation exercises require doing repetitions of dizziness-provoking movements. When these are done on a regular basis, the brain learns to ignore the symptoms through retraining and the dizziness improves. Substitution exercises help with balance by teaching the body to improve its use of vision, touch/pressure, and vestibular senses by changing (wearing dark sunglasses) or eliminating (closing your eyes) your vision and/or by changing (standing on foam cushion) your sense of touch while standing still or doing different movements.

References:

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