Why Refer a Patient with an Acute Vestibular Disorder to a Physical Therapist

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Fact Sheet

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A Special Interest Group of

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A review of the literature suggests that **physical therapy intervention for patients with vestibular disorders is beneficial**.

- A meta-analysis of 39 studies suggested that there was moderate to strong evidence that vestibular rehabilitation is a safe and effective intervention for persons with peripheral vestibular disorders.[1]
- For persons with unilateral vestibular loss, significant differences in postural control were found in participants in a vestibular rehabilitation program compared to a control group.[2-4]
- Repositioning maneuvers are effective, improve quality of life, reduce falls, and improve gait speed in people, especially older adults, who experience Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo (BPPV).[5-10]
- Persons over the age of 70 with dizziness complaints who received vestibular exercises demonstrated significant improvements in dizziness and balance confidence at 3 weeks and 3 months compared to a no-intervention group.[11]
- A recent clinical practice guideline about acute vestibular syndromes suggests that there is strong evidence of substantial benefit of vestibular rehabilitation in persons with unilateral and bilateral peripheral vestibular loss (hypofunction).[12]

Early physical therapy intervention has demonstrated additional benefit.

- People who started early physical therapy (within the first 2 weeks of symptom onset) had better functional outcomes (less dizziness) plus higher VOR gains than those referred between 2-4 weeks or after 4 weeks[13,14]
- Dizziness severity and quality of life measures were predicted by when the balance exercises were initiated, with earlier treatment relating to less dizziness and better quality of life outcomes.[15]
- People with late intervention for BPPV were more likely to experience residual dizziness.[16-18]
- Animal studies have suggested that there may be a critical period whereby immobilization has a negative impact on recovery from a vestibular deficit.[19,20]
- Early vestibular exercises in persons with an acute vestibular disorder resulted in better Dizziness Handicap Inventory scores (less dizziness), less anxiety, less reliance on visual cues, and better gait.[21]
- Quality of life improve after vestibular rehabilitation in persons with vestibular disorders.[5,12,22]

In summary, early exercise appears to decrease dizziness, prevent long term complications such as anxiety, improve quality of life, decrease your patient's chance of falling, and improve balance confidence. Acute physical therapy intervention appears to be a safe and efficacious treatment for persons with vestibular disorders.

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