

What is Unilateral Vestibular Hypofunction?

Fact Sheet

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Contact us:

ANPT

5841 Cedar Lake Rd S.

Ste 204

Minneapolis, MN 55416

Phone: 952.646.2038

Fax: 952.545.6073

info@neuropt.org

www.neuropt.org

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What is Unilateral Vestibular Hypofunction?

Unilateral Vestibular Hypofunction (UVH) is a term used when the balance system in one of your inner ears, the peripheral vestibular system, is not working properly. There is a vestibular system in each inner ear, 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 UVH?

There are a number of things that may cause a UVH, but the most common causes are vestibular neuronitis or labyrinthitis that is a viral or bacterial infection that attacks the nerve to your inner ear. Other causes may include:

- 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

What are the common symptoms related to UVH?

Symptoms of UVH will depend on the cause of the problem and vary from person to person. Symptoms can come on suddenly or slowly, can be mild or severe, or may last for a few days to 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 me?

Physical therapy (PT) is a very safe and effective exercise and movement based approach to 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.

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 exercises 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; as well as walking with head turns

Education about the cause of UVH for each person, and ways to decrease symptoms and improve ability to perform daily activities are also important parts of physical therapy.

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