Dizziness

We have all experienced dizziness—dim vision, the room begins to spin and there may be slight nausea. It is also a very common occurrence after a brain injury.

People who say they feel ‘dizzy’ are usually referring to a sensation of turning round or whirling. Alternatively, dizziness may be used to describe a swaying sensation, or a feeling of weakness, faintness, light-headedness or unsteadiness. Occasionally, some individuals say they have blurred vision, feelings of unreality, faints, blackouts or even epileptic fits. Dizziness is a very common complaint after acquiring a brain injury for a number of reasons:

- Parts of the brain stem that monitor balance are damaged
- Double vision
- Blood pressure fluctuations from damage to areas controlling the heart /blood flow
- Damaged areas of the cerebellum may lead to light headedness or imbalance
- Vertigo from damage to the inner ear.

VESTIBULAR SYSTEM

The Vestibular System is the remarkably sensitive system which is responsible for the body’s sense of motion, and its ability to keep its balance and focus the eyes, in response to that sense of motion. It is also easily disrupted, both by disease processes and trauma. Although dizziness, nausea and vertigo are very common after a brain injury they are completely missed or ignored in many cases. They can impose an extreme additional burden upon an injured brain. The profound challenges that come with any sense of motion, may leave those with vestibular problems, literally unable to venture forth.

DIAGNOSIS

There is a difference between dizziness and vertigo. Vertigo is triggered by the head moving in different ways that suddenly make the room seem to spin. Dizziness stems from lightheadedness or a sense of imbalance and it will feel as if you are spinning, not the room. It is often worse in the morning hours.

A doctor should be able to diagnose the cause of your dizziness by checking your ears and nervous system, taking your medical history, a blood pressure check and a possible referral to other medical specialists. In some cases brain scans or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or electrical recordings of the brain may be required to make the diagnosis.

TREATMENT

There are many medications available from over the counter motion sickness ones to prescription only medications. Therapy can treat balance and spatial problems with exercises that can make the vestibular system adapt to problematic movements. These may include balance activities or eye movement exercises to help maximize the use of remaining vestibular function, sight and sensation in the feet to keep balance. Some may find that acupuncture can lessen dizziness by using certain pressure points to diminish an attack. Some useful tips for everyday use are:

- Don’t use alcohol and other drugs
- Get out of bed slowly in the morning
- Stop the moment dizziness starts and sit or lie down until it passes
- Avoid or slow down problematic movements or change your environment
- Sleep without a pillow to keep your neck and backbone perfectly straight
- Cut down on salt as this can increase the sensation of vertigo
- Try to pinpoint times or conditions where you are more likely to get dizzy.

The good news is that dizziness is often only a short term problem after a brain injury with suitable and timely treatment.