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Monday June 2, 2008

Spinning spells: Determining the symptoms of dizziness

By WONG LI ZA

A dizzy attack may be accompanied by other symptoms such as blurred vision, disorientation, nausea, fatigue and weakness.

ONE minute, Kim was laughing with some friends over lunch in a crowded restaurant. The next minute she fell quiet, her head bowed, eyes closed, hands holding her temple.

When asked what was wrong, she took a while to respond: her head was spinning. The episode lasted about one minute, after which Kim felt fine, albeit a little shaken.

Kim, 34, just had a bout of vertigo, a sensation that the room or surrounding is spinning or moving.



Dr Kuljit Singh: '(The biggest misconception about the condition is) most people are afraid they have a terrible (disease) like cancer.'

Vertigo is a form of dizziness, a problem common among women.

According to Ear, Nose and Throat Society of Malaysia president elect Dr Kuljit Singh, more women seem to suffer from dizziness than men, judging by the number of women patients at the clinics where he practises.

"There is no specific scientific evidence for this but perhaps women's vestibular system (body balance system of the inner ear) may be more sensitive," said Dr Kuljit Singh.

By definition, dizziness refers to physical unsteadiness, imbalance or light-headedness. It is more a symptom rather than a disease. Besides loss of balance, other symptoms that accompany dizziness are blurred vision (when one turns the head quickly), disorientation, nausea, fatigue and weakness.

Although not as painful as headaches or migraines, the condition can temporarily paralyse one's movement, especially if the victim cannot walk or even stand up. If an episode strikes while one is walking down the stairs, it could be dangerous.

Fortunately, people who are driving rarely feel dizzy or have vertigo.

"Usually a driver's vision is concentrated on the road and therefore, provides sufficient information to the brain. This almost never causes any kind of vertigo, unless there is a serious disease like brain tumour," said Dr Kuljit Singh.

Generally, a dizzy spell disappears on its own but there are people who

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suffer from it on a persistent, long-term basis, which can curb their quality of life.

According to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (one of the United States' National Institutes of Health), more than 40% of Americans will experience dizziness that needs medical attention.

However, dizziness is rarely a life-threatening condition, although it can be a symptom of other health problems.



Spinning until you are dizzy may be great fun if you are a kid.

“(The biggest misconception about the condition is) most people are afraid they have a terrible (disease or condition) like cancer. In most cases it is just a temporary condition, but it needs to be investigated,” he said.

Many women also attribute menstruation to their dizzy spells.

“In normal circumstances, menstruation should not lower haemoglobin levels until it leads to dizziness. If it does, then treatment is needed to control the heavy flow or there is some other problem,” said Dr Kuljit Singh.

Unravelling the reasons

Balance in sitting, standing and walking depends on information the brain receives from our eyes, nervous system and inner ears. Good balance requires at least two of these sensory systems to work well.

Our cerebellum or the back portion of the brain also modifies these inputs, and disturbances to this part of the body can lead to dizziness.

Dehydration, certain medication, disorders of blood circulation affecting the inner ear or brain, and ageing can cause dizziness.

Other possible causes are eye and heart problems, high blood cholesterol levels, diabetes, anaemia, neurological problems such as multiple sclerosis, migraine and tumours, inner ear diseases and inner ear infections.



If a dizzy spell strikes while one is walking down the stairs, it could be dangerous.

Dizziness caused by inner ear diseases usually comes with hearing symptoms such as hearing loss or tinnitus (noise in the ear). Patients who suffer from this kind of dizziness often experience vertigo.

Inner ear infections are also called labyrinthitis, usually caused by viral infections. Bacterial labyrinthitis is rare but can give rise to severe complications such as meningitis.

Sometimes, infection of the middle ear produces toxins that attack the inner ear, causing dizzy spells. Persistent discharge from the ear and dizziness may be signs of chronic middle ear infections that require medical attention.

Meniere's disease, characterised by vertigo, tinnitus, hearing loss and pressure sensation inside the ear, is another cause of dizziness.

This form of giddiness attack can last from 20 minutes to four hours, at times accompanied by nausea and vomiting.

The US National Institutes of Health estimates that more than half a million people in the country have Meniere's disease, with over 38,000 people diagnosed each year.

Vertigo is the most common type of dizziness. There are various forms of vertigo, the most widespread being benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV).

BPPV is a condition characterised by short but severe attacks of dizziness when one turns her head in a particular position, especially when lying down in bed.

It usually lasts only a few seconds but may be intense enough to cause nausea and vomiting. This condition occurs when normal calcium carbonate crystals break loose and fall into the wrong part of the inner ear canals.

The moving of these particles stimulates sensors in our ear, resulting in the feeling of imbalance. However, BPPV can be cured by a series of head-turning manoeuvres, called Epley's manoeuvre, that help to move the particles back to its original position.

Anxiety, which leads to hyperventilation, may also cause someone to feel dizzy.

Seek medical advice immediately if your dizziness or vertigo is accompanied by any one of these other symptoms - blurred vision, a different kind of, or severe, headache, speech impairment, loss of hearing, weakness in the leg or arm, falling or difficulty walking, numbness or tingling, loss of consciousness, chest pain, or quick or slow heart beats.

For more information, go to:

emedicinehealth.com/vertigo/articleem.htm

nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/dizzinessandvertigo.html

neurologychannel.com/vertigo

mayoclinic.com

vestibular.org

Dispelling dizziness

BELOW are general tips for people with balance disorders:

Change your position slowly, especially when going from a lying down or sitting position to a standing position. When you get out of bed, sit on the side of the bed for several minutes to gain your orientation and allow your circulatory system to adjust.

When walking, focus on distant objects. Do not look down at your feet. Avoid walking in dark areas or on unstable ground.

When riding in a car, try to sit in the front seat. Look out the window at a fixed point. When going around curves, look at a distant object beyond the curve.

Maximise the function of other sensory systems, such as hearing and sight. Investigate the need for new glasses or hearing aids.

Use a cane, walking stick, or walker for support and to give additional pressure and touch orientation.

If you are having dizzy attacks, do not drive or operate machinery until your doctor says it is safe to do so. Avoid climbing ladders or other situations that may be dangerous should you suddenly feel dizzy.

Be especially cautious when using medications that may cause balance problems as a side effect.

Source: MedicineNet.com

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