

Makes Your Pet Suddenly Dizzy and Act Drunk

Ever had a time when you were so dizzy the room felt like it was spinning? It can happen to these particular pets, too. And can come on like gangbusters, complete with falling down, nausea and more. If this is what triggers it, an ounce of prevention could truly be worth a pound of relief.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Peripheral vestibular syndrome, which is a problem with balance that involves structures in the inner ear, is relatively common in older dogs
- Symptoms include head tilting and a drunken gait, circling, falling down, rhythmic jerking eye movements and nausea
- In older dogs with idiopathic vestibular syndrome, symptoms usually show improvement within 72 hours, with full recovery (other than a persistent head tilt in many cases) within one to two weeks
- Treating a dog with the condition involves supportive care to relieve symptoms and ensure the patient remains hydrated and nourished and can rest comfortably; there are also natural remedies that can be beneficial
- It's important not to continue to vaccinate a senior or geriatric dog who has (or had) vestibular syndrome, and extreme care should be exercised when cleaning the ears of older dogs

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The vestibular system is a collection of structures in the inner ear that gives your dog his sense of balance and spatial orientation. When the vestibular system malfunctions, the brain doesn't have the information it needs to understand the body's relationship with the external environment.

Vestibular disease comes in two forms, but the more common one by far is peripheral vestibular disease, and since it happens most often to older dogs, it's also referred to as old dog vestibular syndrome. Another name for it is canine idiopathic (of unknown origin) vestibular syndrome. The syndrome also occurs in younger dogs and there are a number of underlying diseases that can cause it, but this article will specifically discuss the condition when it occurs with no apparent cause in older dogs.

Symptoms of Old Dog Vestibular Syndrome

The scary thing about this disease is that it comes on very suddenly and typically manifests as a pronounced head tilt and drunken gait. Many pet parents see this unexpected and startling behavior in their senior or geriatric dog and assume he's had a stroke.

Diagnosis and Next Steps

If your dog is getting up in years and her symptoms came on very suddenly, your veterinarian will suspect old dog vestibular syndrome and will perform a physical exam, which should include looking deep into her ears. Blood tests will also be performed to help eliminate other potential causes for the symptoms, along with x-rays in some cases.

If these initial tests don't reveal an underlying cause for an older dog's symptoms, it's a good idea to wait a few days and see if there's gradual improvement. With idiopathic vestibular disease, noticeable improvement is typically seen within about 72 hours. Many dogs are back to normal in one to two weeks, though some degree of head tilting often persists.

If within a few days there's no improvement in your dog's symptoms or they're getting worse, chances are there's something more serious going on, unfortunately including a brain tumor, and more testing will be recommended.

Caring for a Dog with Idiopathic Vestibular Syndrome

There is no specific treatment for vestibular disease, so the goal is to manage your dog's symptoms and provide supportive care as needed. The nausea and vomiting often suffered by these patients can be alleviated with motion sickness remedies. If a middle or inner ear infection is present, antimicrobials will be needed.

Dogs with vestibular syndrome often feel very dizzy, and it can prevent them from walking normally or at all. Because these patients may not eat or drink enough, they sometimes need to be hospitalized to receive intravenous (IV) fluids and supplemental nutrition.

When caring for your dog at home, you may need to place food and water very close to her (perhaps in elevated bowls) to encourage her to eat and drink. Some dogs even need to be hand-fed until they're feeling better. Many dogs also need help getting back and forth to their potty spot. If your dog is too heavy to carry, you'll need to use a harness to support him as you guide him outside.

It's also a good idea to trim your dog's nails and use Dr. Buzby's ToeGrips to help him stabilize his body when he's standing and walking. Cover slick floors and limit access to stairs.

Your dog may also benefit from being confined to a small space or pen in your home until he's no longer at risk of falling. It's important that he can see and hear you while he's resting, so don't crate or confine him in a separate room. Also provide him with very supportive bedding that makes it easy for him to get comfortable.

A body harness with easy handles for support and stability can also be beneficial. Be sure to spend some extra time down at floor level with your dog, talking softly and reassuringly to him, and petting and calming him.

Beneficial Natural Remedies

Many older dogs are really stressed by episodes of vestibular disorder, so natural calming agents like the amino acid L-theanine, as well as herbs such as passionflower, hops, skullcap, valerian and chamomile can be given to help them cope. Other remedies such as tryptophan, GABA, CBD oil and flower essences can also be very beneficial in calming overwhelmed dogs.

It's important to know that idiopathic vestibular syndrome isn't a painful condition, so while your dog may seem miserable due to dizziness, fortunately, you can at least be assured he's not in pain.

Potential Triggers for Vestibular Syndrome in Old Dogs

While we're not sure what causes vestibular syndrome, a small study of cats who developed the condition immediately after a veterinary visit showed the kitties received a variety of treatments, including "ear flush, gentle ear cleaning, vaccination, dental, anesthesia, or sedation."¹

It's possible that conditions such as vestibular syndrome that suddenly appear "out of nowhere," especially in older pets, probably do have an underlying cause — it just hasn't been identified yet. It would be interesting to see data on vaccination histories and old dogs who develop the syndrome, because it's possible over-vaccination plays a role.

This is another reason to advocate for your pet when it comes to vaccinations to ensure she isn't receiving too many. For core vaccines (distemper, parvo, adenovirus), insist on titer testing and refuse automatic revaccinations. For rabies, which is required by law, insist on the three-year vaccine versus the one-year vaccine if it's available where you live.

Refuse any noncore vaccine that isn't absolutely, positively necessary (as dictated by a titer test). You should also find a **holistic or integrative veterinarian** who can provide homeopathic detox remedies after each required vaccine.

Remember, pets must be totally healthy to receive vaccines, so any preexisting health condition means the pet should be titered for rabies, as well. And needless to say, if your dog has vestibular syndrome (now or in the past), she shouldn't be vaccinated for anything for the remainder of her life.

Also be very, very careful about how your older dog's ears are cleaned, as there seems to be a connection between ear cleaning and/or cleaning solutions and the development of vestibular disease.

Sources and References

[VCA Hospitals](#)

[Kinship, December 9, 2024](#)

[Dogster, October 16, 2024](#)

¹ [Can Vet J. 2017 Feb; 58\(2\): 187-189](#)