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## Balance problems and dizziness after brain injury: tips and coping strategies

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### Introduction

The ability to maintain balance and orient ourselves to the outside world is vitally important. However, most people take the skill for granted and don't realise the complex interactions involved between multiple systems in the brain and body. Brain injury often disrupts these systems, resulting in many different problems with balance and dizziness.

The problems are different for everyone. The tips and strategies that will work for you will depend on the exact nature and cause of the problems. Some of the suggestions in this factsheet will be ideal for some people but ineffective for others.

It is very important to work with a professional who specialises in balance problems. None of the suggestions on this factsheet should replace expert, professional advice and you should discuss things with your doctor or healthcare professional before you try any of the tips or strategies. You must not change, stop or reduce any medication without discussing it with your doctor.

The 'Medical interventions' section of the Headway factsheet *Balance problems and dizziness after brain injury: causes and treatment* provides detailed information about the appropriate healthcare professionals and treatment options.

The suggestions here are adapted from a range of sources and include techniques used by neurophysiotherapists and other specialists. Many have been adapted from suggestions by users of Headway's HealthUnlocked community. These include a lot of imaginative and ingenious strategies, which could be immensely useful for a lot of people. We would like to say a big thank you to all the Health Unlocked members who contributed.

It is important to remember that practice doesn't always help. Sometimes it is necessary to accept some level of impairment. You may not be able to return to the way you were before the injury, but that doesn't mean you can't lead a fulfilling life.

A final important thing to remember is not to try to rush things. It can take a long time to improve and adapt.



## General tips

### **Keep a balance diary**

It is important to learn to recognise the triggers to your dizziness and balance problems, for example, environments such as busy supermarkets or train stations. Once you recognise the triggers you can anticipate them and develop strategies to cope when they occur.

Keeping a balance diary is a good way of recording when and where you experience balance or dizziness problems. You may then identify triggers and patterns and pinpoint activities you have particular problems with. You can also monitor changes in your condition.

A balance diary can be as simple or as detailed as you find useful. You don't have to record everything on a daily basis, but it can be very informative to note down the problems you have and where and when they occur. Think about the triggers that might have led to the problems; for example, whether you were particularly tired or anxious, the environment you were in, and what was happening just before the problem occurred.

Try to keep your diary in the same place so you always know where it is. This is especially important if you have memory problems. It is a good idea to have a diary or notebook of a convenient size to carry around with you, along with a pen or pencil, so you can make notes at any time.

Smartphones can be a very useful and convenient way to keep a diary. You will usually have it on your person and there are lots of note-taking apps you can download and use.

It can be useful to take your diary to medical appointments. The information could be extremely helpful for the medical professionals in putting together treatment plans.

### **Psychological techniques**

Talking therapies, such as counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy, can help you to develop coping strategies and deal with anxiety. They can also help you accept yourself and feel better about your limitations.

Talk to your GP about referral to talking therapies and see the online directories in the 'Useful organisations' section of this factsheet. For further information see the 'Medical interventions' section of the accompanying Headway factsheet *Balance problems and dizziness after brain injury: causes and treatment*.



## **Talk to friends and family**

Keeping things bottled up and suffering in silence can be the worst thing you can do. Sharing your feelings can help you get things off your chest and other people can also be an excellent source of helpful tips and advice.

## **Stay active**

It can be very tempting to avoid activities that you have difficulties with, but this can make things worse. You can end up avoiding the leisure activities that you used to find enjoyable and subsequently losing contact with friends.

Also, if your balance problems are caused by damage or imbalance of vestibular organs of the inner ears then inactivity can prevent the vestibular compensation process (see 'Vestibular rehabilitation' section of *Balance problems and dizziness after brain injury: physiology, causes and treatment*).

## **Try one thing at a time**

There are often multiple factors which could have an influence on balance problems. If you change many things at once you won't be sure which ones have made a difference. Therefore, changing one thing at a time can help you to isolate the interventions which are most effective.

## **Exercises**

This section provides some ideas for physical exercises which can help improve balance.

- **Vestibular exercises** (see 'Vestibular rehabilitation' section of the accompanying factsheet *Balance problems and dizziness after brain injury: physiology, causes and treatment*).
- **Build and maintain strength, especially core strength** – core strength is very important for balance and can be built up with exercises that target the upper body and abdominal region. Press-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups and weight training are all very effective.
- **Build and maintain flexibility** – stretching exercises can help, as can activities such as yoga, Pilates, Tai Chi and ballet. Classes are widely available and you can also buy instructional books and DVDs.



# factsheet

- **Walking** – this can be a good introduction back into activity or can be a useful exercise in itself.
- **Gym ball** – these are very common in gyms and fairly cheap to buy. There are lots of exercises with gym balls which are excellent for balance and core strength.
- **Balance boards** – these are small, round boards with a spherical base which require practice to be able to stand on without the sides touching the ground. They are widely used in sports rehabilitation and are excellent for improving balance.
- **Weight adjustment** – practice shifting your balance over your feet without moving your feet.
- **Standing on one leg** – try to steadily increase the time you can do this. Be very careful and make sure you have someone else there and/or something to lean on if you lose your balance.
- **Practise walking on different surfaces** – this helps to train the body to adapt to different conditions.
- **Aqua aerobics** – the buoyancy of water allows freedom of movement and is also more forgiving on the body than conventional aerobics. It can be very effective for improving balance when done on a regular basis.
- **Swimming** – can build all-round strength and fitness, which can help with balance, while also supporting the body.
- **Dancing** – this can be a fun way of building fitness, strength and flexibility. There are many different kinds of dance (salsa is one popular example) and classes can be a great way of meeting people. Alternatively, there are dancing computer games or dancing movements that you can do at home.



## Training techniques

As well as strength and fitness exercises, there are a number of training techniques which can help to improve balance.

- Use a guardrail to hold onto while your balance improves.
- Some people need to practise walking on all fours until their balance improves.
- It can be a good idea to wear protective headgear while you are still unsteady. Discuss this with a healthcare professional.
- Practising walking on grass can be very helpful as it is more forgiving if you fall.
- Take any opportunity to practise. Even standing up to do small jobs like brushing your hair, cleaning your teeth or shaving can lead to improvements. You could even try standing on one leg while you perform these tasks.
- It is important to have correct posture, as upright as possible with head and eyes level.
- Practise walking down a chalk line.
- Exercises which involve conflict between the vestibular system and the visual system can be used to train the systems to work together more efficiently. Computer game systems like Nintendo Wii and Xbox Kinect can be very effective training, as can the most up-to-date virtual reality machine Samsung's Oculus Rift.
- Practise walking without a crutch in a safe environment, preferably with someone there to support you if necessary. Try doing this for a little bit further each time.
- Practise movements while leaning on a chair or other solid object.
- Try to make activities fun and enjoyable. That way you will be more likely to stick with them and also the time will be well spent even if your balance doesn't improve.
- Build activities up slowly so as not to dent your confidence by taking on too much too soon.
- Try to vary your activities. If you always practise walking in the same place, try changing your route occasionally. This applies even if you are walking on a lawn or field. Don't just 'plough the same furrow' all the time.



## Compensatory strategies

Exercises and training techniques sometimes can't help or will require a lot of perseverance before you notice an improvement. Therefore, it is important to learn strategies that allow you to compensate for the problems and live the life you want.

This section provides some suggestions for compensatory strategies.

- If necessary, walk with another person to support you.
- Home adaptations/handles – These can help you to hold onto something as you get around the house. An occupational therapist can help with choosing and installing home adaptations.
- Focusing your eyes on upright, solid objects like lampposts can help when walking in the street.
- Using a cane, crutch, or walking frame can be helpful, especially to start off with, as this not only provides support but also feedback as you move forward. It also gives a visual warning to other people.
- Touching objects with your hand as you walk past them can provide feedback, support and a sense of distance.
- Carry a Headway brain injury survivor card to help explain your issues. Some people with balance problems are accused of being drunk, so showing people the card can help them to understand the real problem.
- It might help to wear good quality footwear with soles that allow the feet to feel the ground, thereby providing feedback as you walk.
- Try to stay in reach of something to lean on.
- Try to avoid uneven floors. (Although it is recommended to try practising on different surfaces. Try to practise in controlled conditions and with someone to help you).
- Avoid sudden head movements and swivelling your eyes.
- Use slow, gradual movements when turning round or turning over.
- Learn how to fall safely. Discuss this with a healthcare worker such as a physiotherapist.



## Compensating for problems with darkness

Balance problems can be made worse in dark conditions. This is because visual cues are very important for balance.

If you have particular difficulties in the dark then the following suggestions might help.

- Keep lights and lamps readily available all over the house. Directional lights can be very useful as they can be aimed in the direction you need.
- Put glow-in-the-dark stickers on light switches and door handles so you can always locate them in the dark.
- Make sure you have help in dark places such as cinemas.
- Carry a small pocket flashlight. Alternatively, you can download a torch app for your smartphone.

## Conclusion

Balance and dizziness problems are common after brain injury and manifest themselves in a wide variety of ways. There is no easy way of dealing with the problems but there are treatments and strategies that can help. The most important thing initially is to seek assessment and treatment from a specialist with experience in vestibular problems, such as a neurophysiotherapist.

It is also very important to try to get out and participate in activities, even if only in a limited way. Staying active can help with the process of recovery and also boost self-esteem.

There are lots of activities which can help to improve balance and reduce dizziness. Hopefully the suggestions in this factsheet will provide interesting and stimulating ways to do this. You may also find new ways for yourself. Be imaginative and think about what works for you.

It can also help to have some understanding of the how the human balance systems work and what can go wrong. The Headway factsheet *Balance problems and dizziness after brain injury: causes and treatment* provides introductory scientific information on the subject that you might find useful.



Headway's groups and branches provide excellent help and support and can be a great way of meeting new people and staying active. For information about your local services, visit [www.headway.org.uk/in-your-area.aspx](http://www.headway.org.uk/in-your-area.aspx).

If you'd like to discuss any of the issues raised in this factsheet, or anything else related to brain injury, please contact Headway's nurse-led helpline service. The helpline is staffed from 9am-5pm on weekdays and you can call free on 0808 800 2244, or email [helpline@headway.org.uk](mailto:helpline@headway.org.uk).

## Further reading

*Balance problems and dizziness after brain injury: causes and treatment.* Headway factsheet – [www.headway.org.uk/factsheets.aspx](http://www.headway.org.uk/factsheets.aspx)

*Dizziness and balance problems.* Brain and Spine Foundation - [www.brainandspine.org.uk/dizziness-and-balance-problems](http://www.brainandspine.org.uk/dizziness-and-balance-problems)

*Vestibular rehabilitation exercises.* Brain and Spine Foundation - [www.brainandspine.org.uk/vestibular-rehabilitation-exercises](http://www.brainandspine.org.uk/vestibular-rehabilitation-exercises)

## Useful organisations

The Brain and Spine Foundation  
Tel: 0808 808 1000  
Web: [www.brainandspine.org.uk](http://www.brainandspine.org.uk)

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)  
(Featuring a directory of cognitive behavioural therapists)  
Web: [www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com)

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)  
(Featuring a directory of counsellors and psychotherapists)  
Web: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

British Psychological Society (BPS)  
(Featuring a directory of chartered psychologists)  
Web: [www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy  
(Featuring a directory of physiotherapists)  
Web: [www.csp.org.uk](http://www.csp.org.uk)



Counselling Directory

Web: [www.counselling-directory.org.uk](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk)

The Ménières Society

Tel: 01306 879 883

Web: [www.menieres.org.uk](http://www.menieres.org.uk)

Physio First

Web: [www.physiofirst.org.uk](http://www.physiofirst.org.uk)

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