

Leaves Your Pet Feeling Dizzy, Lame, and Stir-Crazy

It can look downright scary to see your pet spinning around out of control. Could be a sign of a brain tumor, but often has a much less serious origin. Here's what your vet will look for to discern the difference. And how to calm your very scared pet.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Vestibular disease in dogs is a problem with balance and spatial orientation
- Peripheral vestibular disease is the most common form of the condition; it has many potential causes and can also be idiopathic (no identified cause)
- Symptoms include head tilting, loss of coordination, circling and abnormal eye movements; diagnosis typically involves blood and other tests to rule out other potential causes for the dog's symptoms
- There is no specific treatment for vestibular syndrome — the goal is to manage and alleviate symptoms, and provide comfort and supportive care as needed
- There are also several natural remedies that can be beneficial for dogs with vestibular disease

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published July 29, 2018.

If your dog has been diagnosed with vestibular disease, you may be wondering exactly what that means. Simply put, the vestibular system is what affords mammals balance and a sense of spatial orientation. It's actually a system of structures in the inner ear, and when the system malfunctions, the brain doesn't have the information it needs to understand the body's relationship with the external environment. The result is a loss of balance and other symptoms resulting from vertigo and dizziness.

There's a peripheral form of vestibular disease arising from outside the central nervous system that's caused by disorders affecting the inner ear. There's also central vestibular disease, which is a much less common and more serious form of the condition originating inside the central nervous system.

Peripheral vestibular disease can look pretty scary to a dog parent, especially the first time it occurs. But fortunately, many cases improve quickly with supportive care and treatment, as well as addressing the underlying cause for the condition, if there is one.

Causes of Vestibular Disease

There are several potential causes for peripheral vestibular disease, all of which can irritate or damage the nerves of the inner ear and cause inflammation. These include:

- Chronic and recurrent inner and middle ear infections

- Certain types of antibiotics, as well as loop diuretics
- Overzealous cleaning of the ears resulting in a perforated eardrum
- Certain ear cleaners that shouldn't be used with a ruptured eardrum, but inadvertently are
- Trauma from head injury
- Tumors
- Polyps
- Stroke
- Hypothyroidism
- Meningoencephalitis

Peripheral vestibular disease can be congenital (present from birth); it can also be idiopathic, meaning a root cause can't be identified. An infection of the middle ear is by far the most common reason the disease occurs in younger dogs. In older dogs, unfortunately, you need to consider a brain tumor as a potential cause of the syndrome.

Causes of central vestibular disease (the less common, much more serious form) include inflammatory disease, infection, trauma or bleeding in the brain, loss of blood flow and cancer.

Symptoms to Watch For

Signs of vestibular disease include:

- Head tilting
- Loss of coordination
- Circling and stumbling or staggering
- Falling and rolling
- Involuntary, rhythmic, jerking eye movements from side to side or up and down — a condition called nystagmus

Dizziness and loss of balance can cause excessive drooling, nausea and vomiting. If the disease affects only one ear, head tilting and circling will be in the direction of the affected ear. If only one side of the head is involved, only the eye on that side may develop nystagmus.

Congenital vestibular disease is usually seen between birth and 3 months of age. Breeds predisposed to this condition include the German Shepherd, Doberman Pinscher, Akita, English Cocker Spaniel, Beagle, Smooth Fox Terrier and the Tibetan Terrier.

Vestibular disease in older dogs is often mistaken for stroke, because the vertigo caused by the condition can be especially intense, with symptoms of nausea, difficulty or complete inability to stand up, head tilt, nystagmus and circling. In elderly dogs, eating, drinking and going outside to potty can become very difficult or even impossible.

Diagnosing Vestibular Syndrome

Especially if your dog is getting up in years and her symptoms came on very suddenly, your veterinarian will suspect vestibular syndrome and will perform a physical exam including a neurological assessment. He or she will also use an otoscope to look deep into your pet's ears.

Blood tests, culture and sensitivity tests, and cytology will also be needed to help eliminate other potential causes for the symptoms, along with X-rays in some cases.

Your vet may recommend a surgical biopsy if tumors or polyps are found. If the condition is determined to be central vestibular disease, usually an MRI or CT scan, as well as spinal fluid taps, may be needed to identify the root cause. Obviously, if infection is the root cause, it needs to be resolved.

If 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 Disease

There is no specific treatment for vestibular syndrome, 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 pets 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 slippery 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

Homeopathic remedies (in particular, Cocculus) have seen some success, as well as rehabilitation therapies, in helping dogs with vestibular syndrome learn better body awareness and improve their physical stability.

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.
