

Labyrinthitis

What is the labyrinth?

The *labyrinth* is a small bony chamber resembling a snail shell, and is situated deep in the inner ear. The chamber contains a labyrinth of semicircular canals which contain fluid. There is one in each ear and they sense, control and maintain the balance of the body.

Labyrinthitis is inflammation of these semicircular canals of the labyrinth. It is also called otitis interna.

What is the cause of labyrinthitis?

It is most commonly caused by a viral infection of the inner ear which usually spreads from the nose or throat along the Eustachian tube into the middle ear and then to the inner ear. Such an infection inflames the labyrinth and totally disrupts its functioning.

Other less common causes are:

- a bacterial infection of the inner ear
- a head injury.

What are the symptoms?

- Vertigo is the main symptom: you feel extremely dizzy with a sensation that you or your surroundings seem to be spinning around very rapidly.
- Involuntary movement of the eyes: your eyes move slowly sideways and then flick back to their normal position.
- Extreme nausea and vomiting (sometimes).
- Temporary hearing loss (sometimes).
- Tinnitus: ringing in the ear (sometimes).
- Loss of balance: especially falling toward the affected side.

Note:

- The symptoms usually come on suddenly.
- Any movement of the head makes the vertigo worse.
- There is usually a preceding flu-like illness.

What increases the risk of labyrinthitis?

- A recent viral illness, especially a respiratory infection
- Spread of a chronic middle-ear infection
- Ingestion of toxic drugs
- Stress
- Smoking
- Excess alcohol intake
- Excessive salt in the diet
- Certain drugs, especially aspirin
- Cardiovascular or cerebrovascular disease.

How common is labyrinthitis?

It is uncommon but each year about 1 to 2 people in 1000 appear to develop it. Anyone can get labyrinthitis but it seems to be more common in adults.

What is the expected outcome?

It can be a self-limiting disorder (i.e. it gets better naturally) with spontaneous recovery even without treatment in 5 to 7 days. However, it may take several weeks to subside.

What should be done?

Anyone with severe vertigo should see their doctor at the first opportunity. If you cannot travel ask the doctor to visit you. The doctor will examine your ears with an otoscope and question you about any recent respiratory infections.

What is the treatment?

Activity

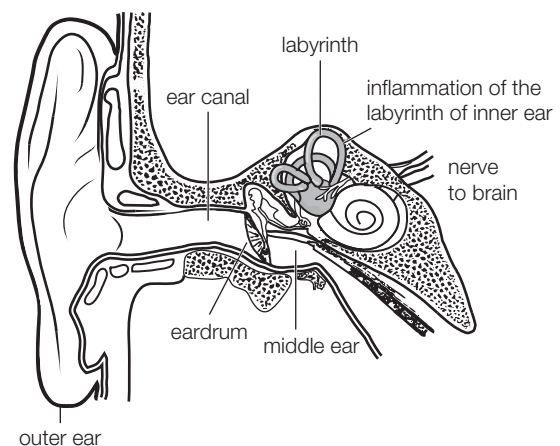
You will need to lie quietly in bed until your vertigo settles and you can move about safely. Keep your head as still as possible. The symptoms can be frightening at first but soon subside. Resume your normal activities slowly. Avoid possible hazardous activities such as driving, climbing or working around dangerous machinery until 1 week after your symptoms disappear.

Medication

Antinausea medication may be prescribed either taken by mouth or even as suppositories or injections. In some cases tranquillisers or antihistamines may be prescribed.

Diet

A salt-reduction diet is strongly recommended for at least 4 weeks.



Labyrinthitis of the inner ear