

Ménière's Disease

Meniere's disease is a disorder of the inner ear where there is a change in the fluid volume. Increases in fluid can cause a rupture in a membrane in the inner ear, allowing two fluids (endolymph and perilymph) to mix. This mixing, scientists believe, causes the symptoms of Meniere's disease. Symptoms include vertigo, severe nausea, sweating, tinnitus, loss of hearing, pressure in the affected ear, loss of balance, and headaches. Attacks often come with little or no warning and last several hours. A person's hearing tends to recover between attacks but over time becomes worse. This disease was named after French physician Prosper Ménière who first described the syndrome in 1861.

An estimated 3-5 million people in the U.S. have Meniere's, with approximately 45,000 more diagnosed each year. Three-fourths of people with Meniere's have the disorder in only one ear.

Diagnosis involves excluding or eliminating the likelihood of other diseases with similar symptoms. Hearing testing is very helpful in making the diagnosis. Meniere's patients may have low frequency or mixed low and high frequency hearing loss. Particularly significant is a documented fluctuating hearing loss, especially in the low frequencies. Other diagnostic tests may include MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) and ENG (electronystagmography).

Treatment

The best way to deal with an acute Meniere's attack is to lie down and stay as motionless as possible, keeping your eyes open and fixed on a stationary object. When the vertigo passes, get up slowly. Many patients feel extremely tired following an episode and need to sleep for several hours.

There is no cure for Meniere's disease. However, the symptoms are often controlled successfully by reducing the body's retention of fluids through dietary changes (such as a low-salt or salt-free diet and no caffeine or alcohol). Eliminating tobacco use and reducing stress levels are more ways some people can lessen the severity of their symptoms. Changes in medications that either control allergies or improve blood circulation in the inner ear may help. Diuretics may be used to help reduce the severity and frequency of vertigo by regulating the fluid pressure in the inner ear.

Some 70 percent of patients with Meniere's eventually experience remission of vertigo symptoms. A variety of surgical treatments often are considered for the remainder. Currently, Gentamicin injections across the eardrum are frequently used and under clinical trial as a treatment.

For more information:

Meniere's Disease Information Center
<http://www.geocities.com/menieresinfo/info.html>

Vestibular Disorders Association
www.vestibular.org