

Meniere's Disease

What is Meniere's disease?

Meniere's (say "men-ears") disease is the name of a problem of the inner ear. No one knows the cause. Meniere's disease has something to do with fluid in canals of the inner ear. Although it can be troublesome, Meniere's is not contagious and it isn't fatal. However, it's a "chronic" problem, which means that it lasts a long time. People with Meniere's disease don't have symptoms all the time. When symptoms occur, it's called an "attack." Attacks may happen often, or only sometimes. Attacks usually last from 20 minutes to 2 hours or longer. Meniere's disease usually occurs in only one ear. It affects both ears in only about 30% of patients.

What are the symptoms during an attack?

The symptoms of Meniere's disease include dizziness, a feeling of fullness in the ear and tinnitus (a roaring sound in the ear). The dizziness is described as a spinning or whirling feeling and may cause problems with balance (feeling unstable while walking). Some people feel nauseated and vomit during an attack (because of the spinning feeling). Some people also notice some hearing loss, especially with sounds that have a low tone.

How does my doctor know if I have Meniere's disease?

Your doctor will ask questions about your symptoms and ask you to describe what happens when you have an attack. Your doctor will want to rule out other ear problems, so he or she may give you some tests. Some tests your doctor might suggest include hearing and blood tests, an MRI or CT scan (tests that "take pictures" of the inside of your ears and head) or special tests for your ears to check your balance and the function of your ears.

What is the treatment for Meniere's disease?

Your doctor may recommend that you try to control the attacks by changing your diet. Since the disease is a result of a problem with fluid in canals of the inner ear, you may have to limit your salt intake. Controlling the level of salt in your body will indirectly control the amount of fluid in the inner ear canals. A medicine called a diuretic (water pill) may also help. You should limit the amount of caffeine and alcohol in your diet, and quit smoking if you smoke. Your doctor can prescribe medicines to help with feelings of dizziness and nausea. These medicines may cause you to feel sleepy. In difficult cases of Meniere's disease (when attacks can't be controlled by diet or medicines), surgery may be necessary.

What should I do during an attack?

During an attack, you should try to lie flat on a surface that doesn't move, such as the floor. To cope with the dizziness, keep your eyes aimed at an object that doesn't move. Don't eat or drink much, so you will be less likely to vomit. When the symptoms go away, get up slowly. You may feel very sleepy and want to sleep for several hours after an attack. If you keep vomiting for more than 24 hours and can't keep down any liquids, call your doctor for medicine to help control the vomiting.

How do I cope with Meniere's disease?

Meniere's disease is often frustrating for people who have it. You may have to change the way you live to control the attacks. You must follow your doctor's advice about diet and alcohol, caffeine and smoking. You may also have to limit the stress in your life or learn how to deal with stress better, since stress may cause an attack. Let your family, friends and co-workers know about the disease. Tell them how they can help you if you have an attack.