Dizziness: Approach to Evaluation and Management

Introduction

- Primary care physicians see at least one-half of the patients who present with dizziness.

- **Dizziness was traditionally classified into four categories based on the patient's description:** (1) vertigo, (2) presyncope, (3) disequilibrium, and (4) light-headedness.
  - However, current approaches do not include presyncope and do not use the vague term light-headedness.

- Physicians are cautioned against overreliance on a descriptive approach to guide the diagnostic evaluation.

- Alternatively, attention to the timing and triggers of dizziness is preferred over the symptom type because patients more consistently report this information.

Table 1. Differential Diagnosis of Dizziness and Vertigo: Common Causes

Cause (most to least frequent)	*Clinical description*
Peripheral causes	
Benign paroxysmal positional vertigo	Transient triggered episodes of vertigo caused by dislodged canaliths in the semicircular canals
Vestibular neuritis	Spontaneous episodes of vertigo caused by inflammation of the vestibular nerve or labyrinthine organs, usually from a viral infection
Meniere disease	Spontaneous episodes of vertigo associated with unilateral hearing loss caused by excess endolymphatic fluid pressure in the inner ear
Otosclerosis	Spontaneous episodes of vertigo caused by abnormal bone growth in the middle ear and associated with conductive hearing loss

Central causes	
Vestibular migraine	Spontaneous episodes of vertigo associated with migraine headaches
Cerebrovascular disease	Continuous spontaneous episodes of vertigo caused by arterial occlusion or insufficiency, especially affecting the vertebrobasilar system
Cerebellopontine angle and posterior fossa meningiomas	Continuous spontaneous episodes of dizziness caused by vestibular schwannoma (i.e., acoustic neuroma), infratentorial ependymoma, brainstem glioma, medulloblastoma, or neurofibromatosis

Other causes	
Psychiatric	Initially episodic, then often continuous episodes of dizziness without another cause and associated with psychiatric condition (e.g., anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder)
Medication induced	Continuous episodes of dizziness without another cause and associated with a possible medication adverse effect
Cardiovascular/ metabolic	Acute episodic symptoms that are not associated with any triggers
Orthostatic	Acute episodic symptoms associated with a change in position from supine or sitting to standing

General Approach

- Questions regarding **the timing** (onset, duration, and evolution of dizziness) and **triggers** (actions, movements, or situations) that provoke dizziness can categorize the dizziness as more likely to be peripheral or central in etiology.

- Findings from the physical examination can help confirm a probable diagnosis.

TITRATE THE EVALUATION

- **TiTrATE** is a novel diagnostic approach to determining the probable etiology of dizziness or vertigo.
- The approach uses the **Ti**ming of the symptom, the **Tr**iggers that provoke the symptom, **A**nd a **T**argeted **E**xamination.
- The responses place the dizziness into one of three clinical scenarios: episodic triggered, spontaneous episodic, or continuous vestibular.

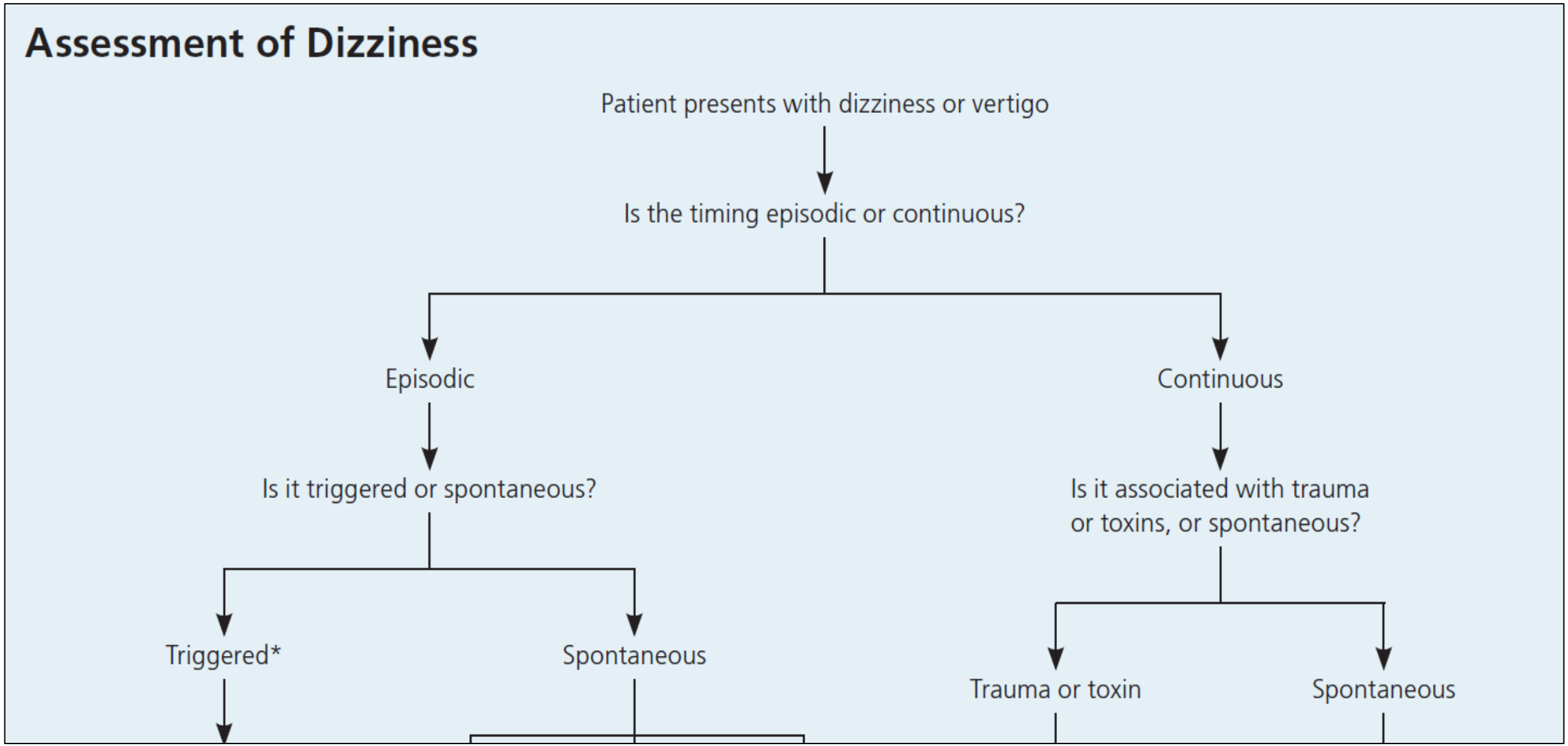
TITRATE THE EVALUATION

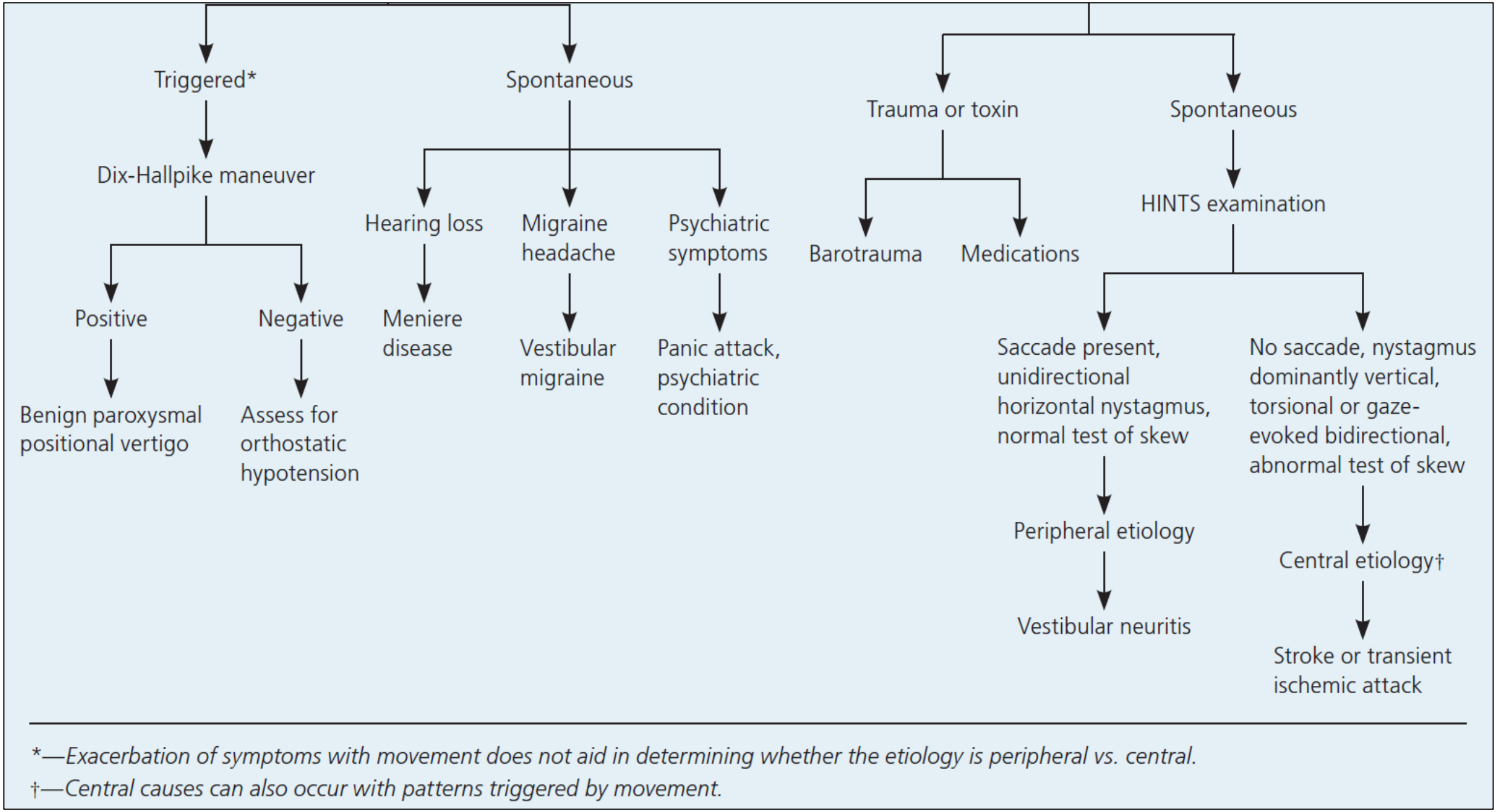
- With episodic triggered symptoms, patients have brief episodes of intermittent dizziness lasting seconds to hours.
- Common triggers are head motion on change of body position (e.g., rolling over in bed).
- Episodic triggered symptoms are consistent with a diagnosis of benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV).
- With spontaneous episodic symptoms (no trigger), patients have episodes of dizziness lasting seconds to days.
- Symptoms associated with lying down are more likely vestibular.

TITRATE THE EVALUATION

- With continuous vestibular symptoms, patients have persistent dizziness lasting days to weeks.
- The symptoms may be due to traumatic or toxic exposure.
- Classic vestibular symptoms include continuous dizziness or vertigo associated with nausea, vomiting, nystagmus, gait instability, and head-motion intolerance.
- In the absence of trauma or exposures, these findings are most consistent with vestibular neuritis or central etiologies. However, central causes can also occur with patterns triggered by movement.

Assessment of Dizziness





—Exacerbation of symptoms with movement does not aid in determining whether the etiology is peripheral vs. central.

†—*Central causes can also occur with patterns triggered by movement.*

HISTORY: TIMING, TRIGGERS, AND MEDICATIONS

- Patients who describe a sensation of self-motion when they are not moving or a sensation of distorted self-motion during normal head movement may have vertigo.

- Vertigo is the result of asymmetry within the vestibular system or a disorder of the peripheral labyrinth or its central connections.

- The distinction between vertigo and dizziness is of limited clinical usefulness.

HISTORY: TIMING, TRIGGERS, AND MEDICATIONS

- If vertigo is described, physicians should ask about hearing loss, which could suggest Meniere disease.

- Diagnostic criteria for Meniere disease include:
  - Episodic vertigo (at least two episodes lasting at least 20 minutes)
  - Documented low-to medium-frequency sensorineural hearing loss by audiometric testing in the affected ear
  - Tinnitus or aural fullness in the affected ear
  - The auditory symptoms are initially unilateral

HISTORY: TIMING, TRIGGERS, AND MEDICATIONS

- Physicians should determine whether the vertigo is triggered by a specific position or change in position.
- BPPV is triggered with sudden changes in position, such as a quick turn of the head on awakening or tipping the head back in the shower.
- Dizziness from orthostatic hypotension occurs with movement to the upright position.
- Medications were implicated in 23% of cases of dizziness in older adults in a primary care setting.
- The use of five or more medications is associated with an increased risk of dizziness.

Table 2. Medications Associated with Dizziness

Medication	*Causal mechanism*
Alcohol	Cardiac effects: hypotension, postural hypotension, torsades de pointes, other arrhythmias
Antiarrhythmics, class 1a	
Antidementia agents	
Antiepileptics	
Antihistamines (sedating)	
Antihypertensives	
Anti-infectives: anti-influenza agents, antifungals, quinolones	
Antiparkinsonian agents	
Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder agents	
Digitalis glycosides	
Dipyridamole	
Narcotics	
Nitrates	
Nitrates	
Phosphodiesterase type 5 inhibitors	
Skeletal muscle relaxants	
Sodium–glucose cotransporter-2 inhibitors	
Urinary anticholinergics	
Skeletal muscle relaxants	Central anticholinergic effects
Urinary and gastrointestinal antispasmodics	
Antiepileptics	Cerebellar toxicity
Benzodiazepines	
Lithium	
Antidiabetic agents	Hypoglycemia
Beta adrenergic blockers	
Aminoglycosides	Ototoxicity
Antirheumatic agents	
Anticoagulants	Bleeding complications (anticoagulants), bone marrow suppression (antithyroid agents)
Antithyroid agents	

PHYSICAL EXAMINATION

- Blood pressure should be measured while the patient is standing and in the supine position.

- Orthostatic hypotension is present when the systolic blood pressure decreases 20 mm Hg, the diastolic blood pressure decreases 10 mm Hg, or the pulse increases 30 beats per minute after going from supine to standing for one minute.

- A full neurologic examination should be performed in patients with orthostatic dizziness but no hypotension or BPPV.

PHYSICAL EXAMINATION

- The use of the HINTS (head-impulse, nystagmus, test of skew) examination can help distinguish a possible stroke (central cause) from acute vestibular syndrome (peripheral cause).

- **Head-Impulse:**
  - While the patient is sitting, the head is thrust 10 degrees to the right and then to the left while the patient's eyes remain fixed on the examiner's nose.
  - If a saccade (rapid movement of both eyes) occurs, the etiology is likely peripheral.
  - No eye movement strongly suggests a central etiology.

PHYSICAL EXAMINATION

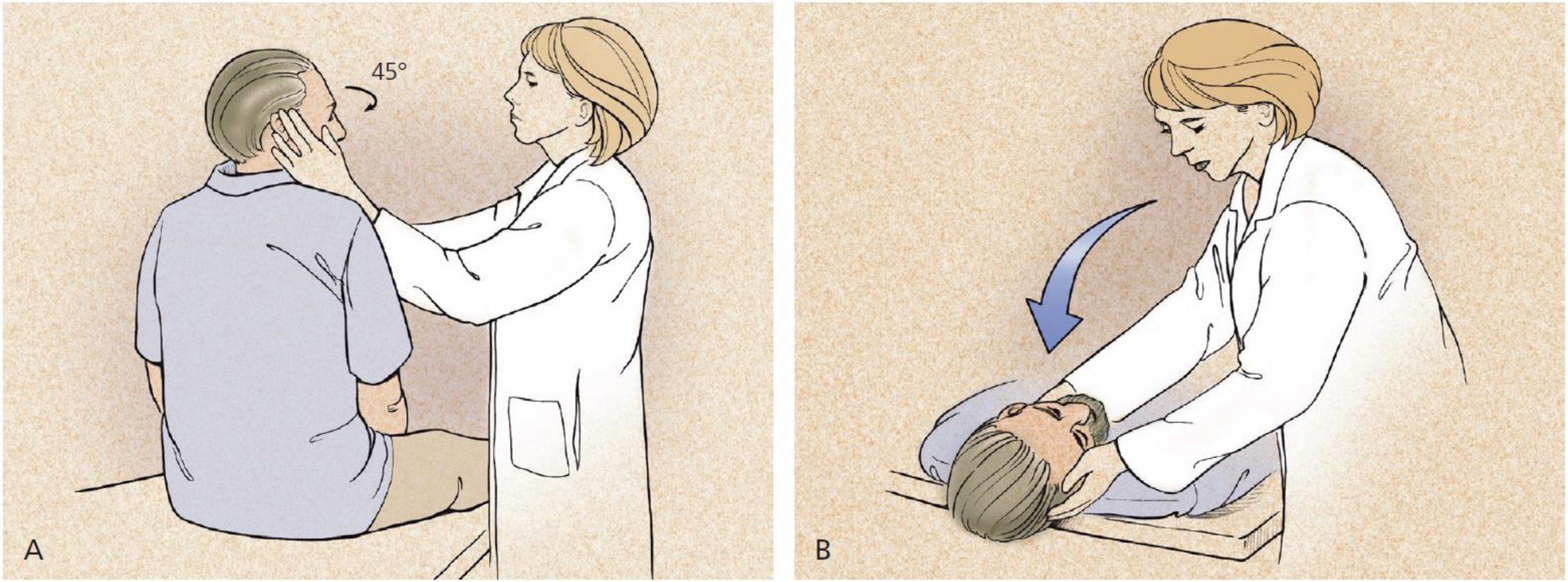
- Nystagmus:
  - The patient should follow the examiner's finger as it moves slowly left to right.
  - Spontaneous unidirectional horizontal nystagmus that worsens when gazing in the direction of the nystagmus suggests a peripheral cause (vestibular neuritis).
  - Spontaneous nystagmus that is dominantly vertical or torsional, or that changes direction with the gaze (gaze-evoked bidirectional) suggests a central etiology.

PHYSICAL EXAMINATION

- **Test of Skew:**
  - Test of skew is assessed by asking the patient to look straight ahead, then cover and uncover each eye.
  - Vertical deviation of the covered eye after uncovering is an abnormal result.
  - Although this is a less sensitive test for central pathology, an abnormal result is fairly specific for brainstem involvement.

PHYSICAL EXAMINATION

- **BPPV is diagnosed with the Dix-Hallpike maneuver:**
  - Transient upbeat-torsional nystagmus during the maneuver is diagnostic of BPPV if the timing and trigger are consistent with BPPV.
  - Nystagmus may not develop immediately, and a sense of vertigo may occur and last for one minute.
  - A negative result does not rule out BPPV if the timing and triggers are consistent with BPPV.
  - Nystagmus with the maneuver may be due to a central etiology, especially if the timing and trigger are not consistent with BPPV.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARCIA HARTSOCK

Figure 2. Dix-Hallpike maneuver (used to diagnose benign paroxysmal positional vertigo). This test consists of a series of two maneuvers: *(A)* With the patient sitting on the examination table, facing forward, eyes open, the physician turns the patient's head 45 degrees to the right. *(B)* The physician supports the patient's head as the patient lies back quickly from a sitting to supine position, ending with the head hanging 20 degrees off the end of the examination table. The patient remains in this position for 30 seconds. Then the patient returns to the upright position and is observed for 30 seconds. Next, the maneuver is repeated with the patient's head turned to the left. A positive test is indicated if any of these maneuvers trigger vertigo with or without nystagmus. A video of the procedure is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRpwf2mI3SU.

LABORATORY TESTING AND IMAGING

- Most patients presenting with dizziness do not require laboratory testing.
- Patients with chronic medical conditions (e.g., diabetes mellitus, hypertension) may require blood glucose and electrolyte measurements.
- Patients with symptoms suggestive of cardiac disease should undergo electrocardiography, Holter monitoring, and possibly carotid Doppler testing.
- Routine imaging is not indicated.
  - However, any abnormal neurologic finding, including asymmetric or unilateral hearing loss, requires computed tomography or magnetic resonance imaging to evaluate for cerebrovascular disease.

Pay Attention…

- Hearing loss with vertigo and normal neuroimaging suggests Meniere disease.

Peripheral Etiologies

- Peripheral causes of dizziness arise from abnormalities in the peripheral vestibular system, which is comprised of the **semicircular canals, the saccule, the utricle, and the vestibular nerve.**

- Common peripheral causes of dizziness/vertigo include BPPV, vestibular neuritis (i.e., vestibular neuronitis), and Meniere disease.

BENIGN PAROXYSMAL POSITIONAL VERTIGO

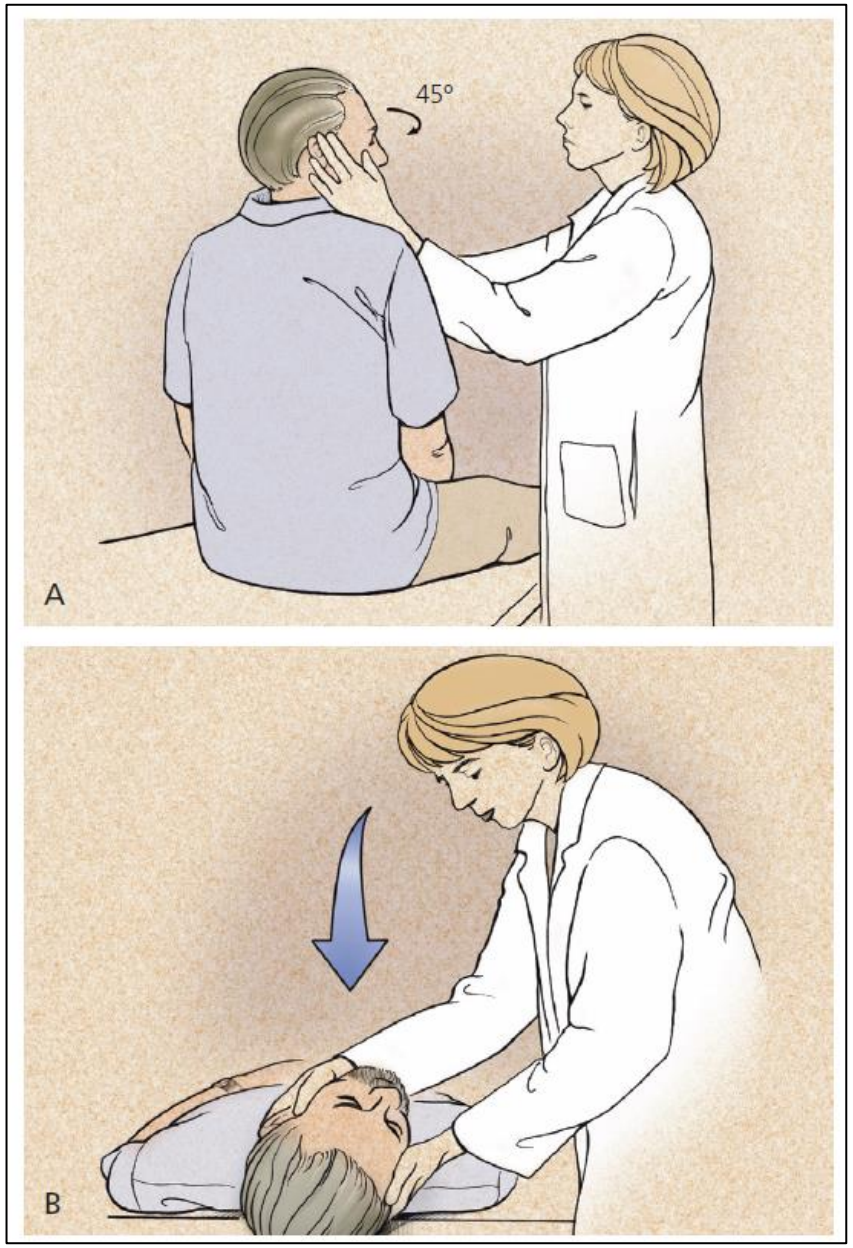
- BPPV occurs when loose otoconia, known as canaliths, become dislodged and enter the semicircular canals, usually the posterior canal.
- BPPV can occur at any age but is most common between 50 and 70 years.
- No obvious cause is found in 50% to 70% of older patients, but head trauma is a possibility in younger persons.

BENIGN PAROXYSMAL POSITIONAL VERTIGO

- Treatment of BPPV consists of a canalith repositioning procedure such as the Epley maneuver, which repositions the canalith from the semicircular canal into the vestibule.
  - The success rate is approximately 70% on the first attempt, and nearly 100% on successive maneuvers.
  - Home treatment with Brandt-Daroff exercises can also be successful.

- If there is no improvement with repeated repositioning maneuvers, or if atypical or ongoing nystagmus with nausea is present, another cause should be considered.

- Pharmacologic treatment has no role in the treatment of BPPV.
  - Vestibular suppressant medications should be avoided because they interfere with central compensation and may increase the risk of falls.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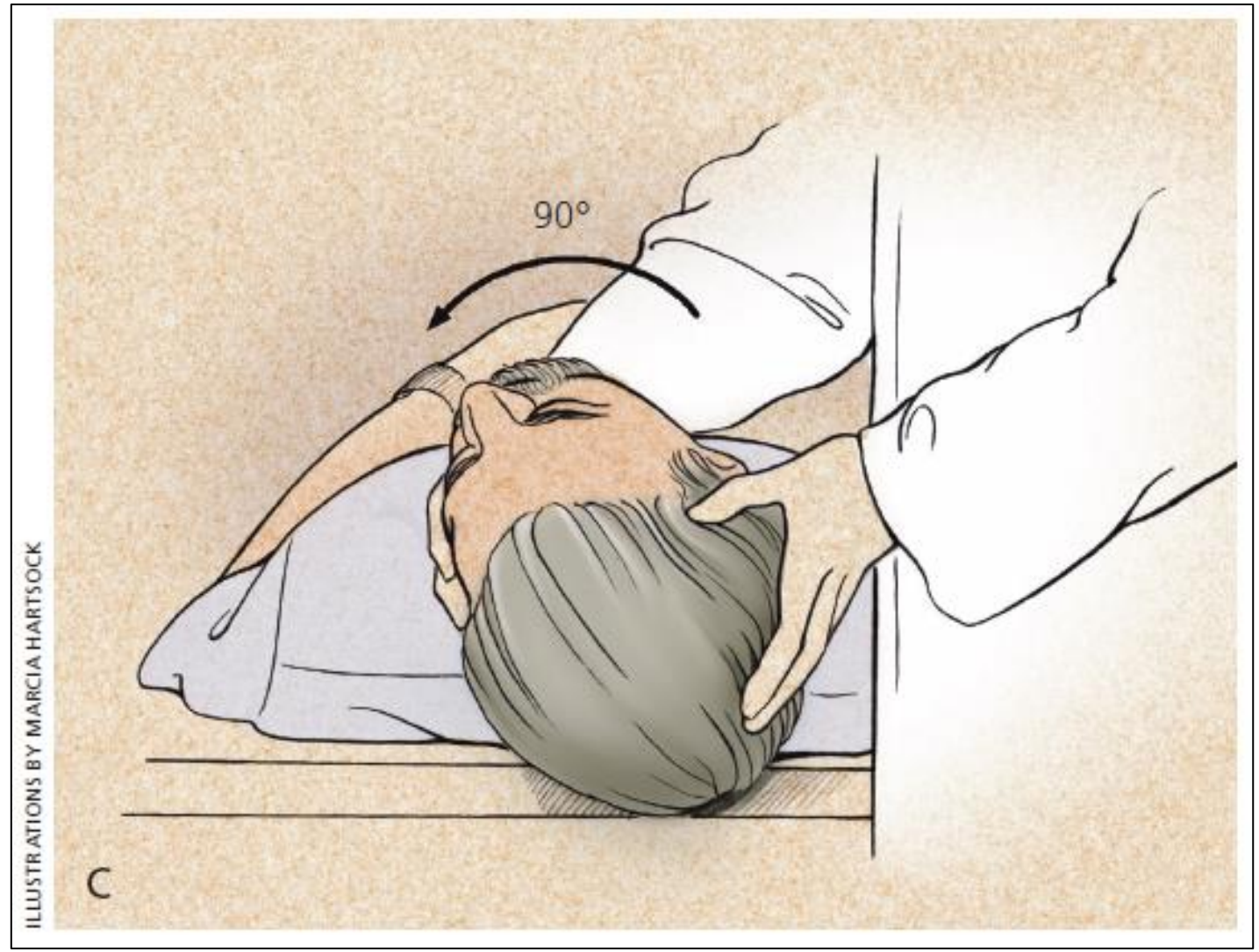
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ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARCIA HARTSOCK

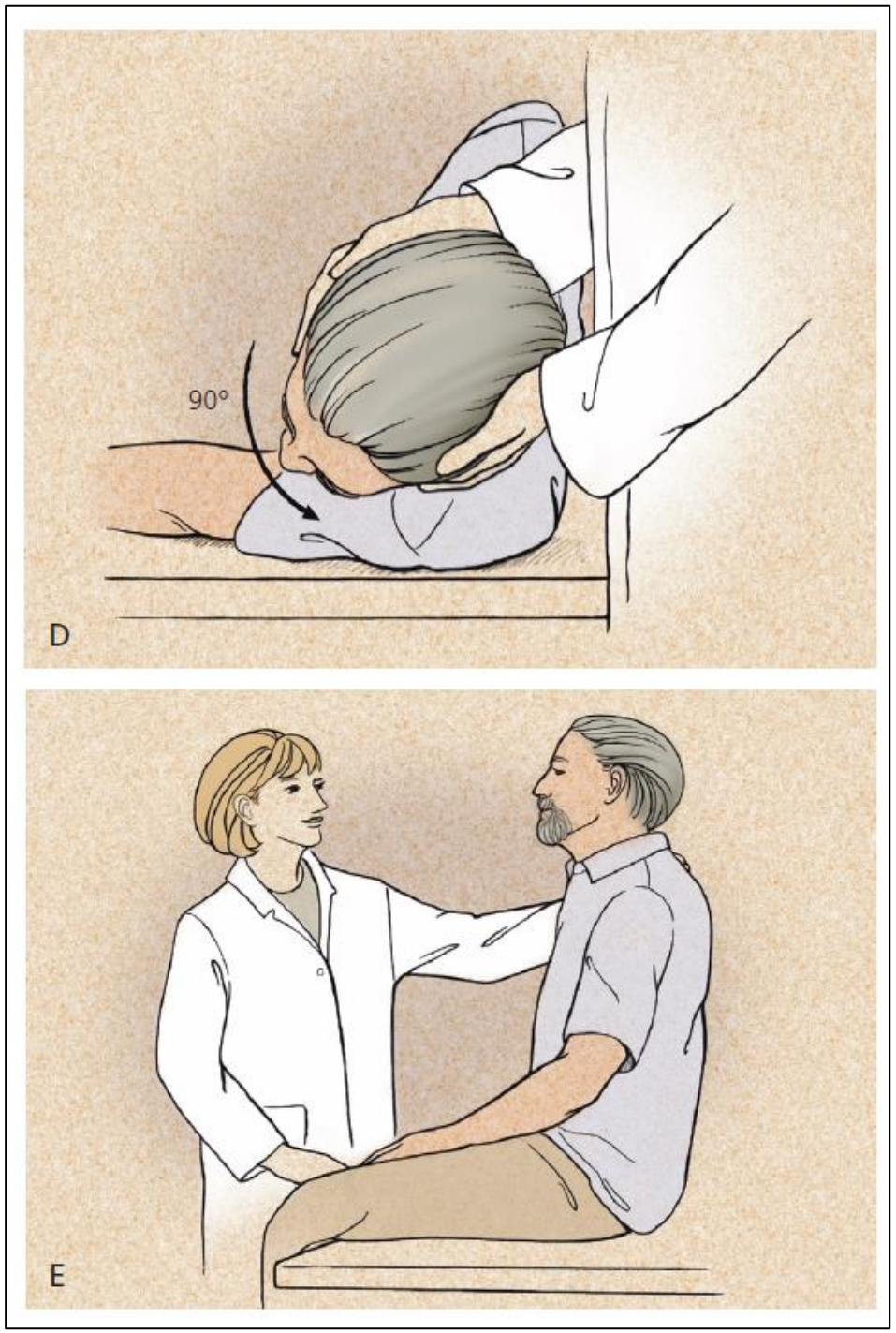
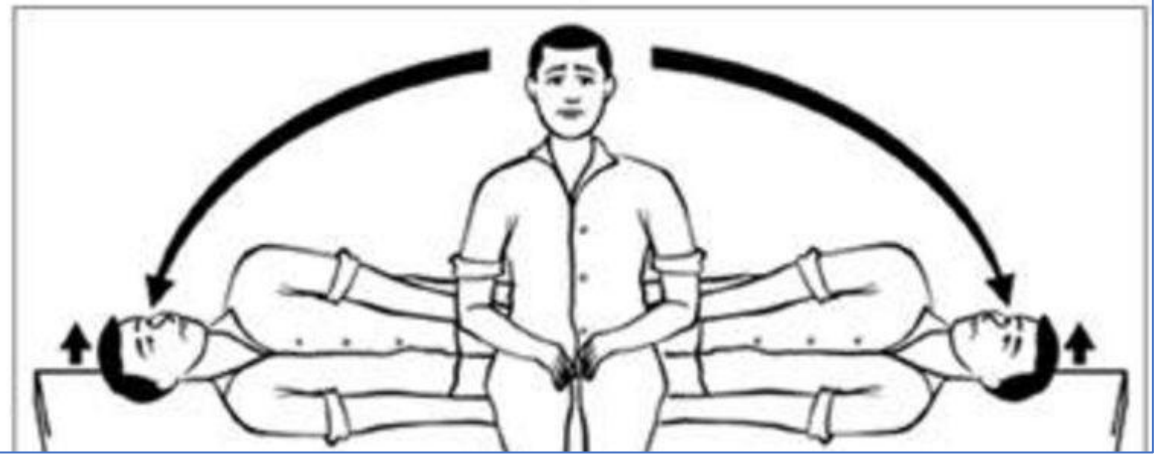


Figure 3. Epley maneuver. *(A)* The patient sits on the examination table, with eyes open and head turned 45 degrees to the right. *(B)* The physician supports the patient's head as the patient lies back quickly from a sitting to supine position, ending with the head hanging 20 degrees off the end of the examination table. *(C)* The physician turns the patient's head 90 degrees to the left side. The patient remains in this position for 30 seconds. *(D)* The physician turns the patient's head an additional 90 degrees to the left while the patient rotates his or her body 90 degrees in the same direction. The patient remains in this position for 30 seconds. *(E)* The patient sits up on the left side of the examination table. The procedure may be repeated on either side until the patient experiences relief of symptoms. A video of the procedure is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqokxZRbJfw&NR=1.

- Habituation exercises – brandt daroff exercises
  Upright position – lie down to one side while the head should hold in a 45 degree angle – sit back after 30 sec – do the next side .
- Functional retraining – postural control and balance training.



VESTIBULAR NEURITIS

- Vestibular neuritis, the second most common cause of vertigo, is thought to be of viral origin.
- It most commonly affects persons 30 to 50 years of age. Men and women are affected equally.
- Vestibular neuritis is diagnosed on the basis of the clinical history and physical examination.
- It can cause severe rotatory vertigo with nausea and apparent movement of objects in the visual field (oscillopsia), horizontally rotating spontaneous nystagmus to the nonaffected side, or an abnormal gait with a tendency to fall to the affected side.
- Hearing is not impaired in this condition.

VESTIBULAR NEURITIS

- As vestibular compensation occurs, the patient's vertigo resolves slowly over a few days.
- In 50% of patients, the underlying nerve damage may take two months to resolve.
- However, a sensation of disequilibrium may persist for months because of unilateral impairment of vestibular function.
- If the attacks do not become successively shorter, another diagnosis should be considered.
- Reassurance, explanation, and advice are essential, in combination with symptomatic treatment for the first few days.

VESTIBULAR NEURITIS

- Vestibular neuritis is treated with medications and vestibular rehabilitation.
- Antiemetics and antinausea medications should be used for no more than three days because of their effects in blocking central compensation.
- Vertigo and associated nausea or vomiting can be treated with a combination of antihistamine, antiemetic, or benzodiazepine.
- Although systemic corticosteroids have been recommended as a treatment for vestibular neuritis, there is insufficient evidence for their routine use.
- Antiviral medications are ineffective.

Table 3. Vestibular Suppressant Medications

Medication	*Dosage*	*Adverse effects*
Antiemetics		
Metoclopramide (Reglan)	5 to 10 mg orally every 6 hours, or 5 to 10 mg slowly IV every 6 hours	Akathesia, atrioventricular block, bradycardia, bronchospasm, dizziness, drowsiness, dystonic reaction, gynecomastia, nausea, tardive dyskinesia
Prochlorperazine	5 to 10 mg orally or IM every 6 to 8 hours	Agitation, dizziness, drowsiness, dystonic reaction, extrapyramidal symptoms, photosensitivity, tardive dyskinesia
Antihistamines		
Dimenhydrinate	50 mg orally every 6 hours	Anorexia, blurred vision, dizziness, drowsiness, nausea
Meclizine (Antivert)	12.5 to 50 mg orally every 4 to 8 hours	Blurred vision, drowsiness, fatigue, headache, vomiting
Promethazine	25 mg every 6 hours orally, IM, or rectally every 4 to 12 hours	Agitation, bradycardia, confusion, constipation, drowsiness, dizziness, dystonia, extrapyramidal symptoms, gynecomastia, photosensitivity, urinary retention
Benzodiazepines		
Diazepam (Valium)	2 to 10 mg orally or IV every 4 to 8 hours	Amnesia, drowsiness, slurred speech, vertigo
Lorazepam (Ativan)	1 to 2 mg orally every 4 hours	Amnesia, dizziness, drowsiness, slurred speech, vertigo

IM = intramuscularly; IV = intravenously.

MENIERE DISEASE

- Meniere disease causes vertigo and unilateral hearing loss.
- Although it can develop at any age, it is more common between 20 and 60 years.
- The vertigo associated with Meniere disease is often severe enough to necessitate bed rest and can cause nausea, vomiting, and loss of balance.
  - Other symptoms include sudden slips or falls, and headache with hearing loss worsened during an attack.
- The underlying pathology is excess endolymphatic fluid pressure leading to inner ear dysfunction; however, the exact cause is unknown.
- Patients manifest a unidirectional, horizontal-torsional nystagmus during vertigo episodes.

MENIERE DISEASE

- First-line treatment of Meniere disease involves lifestyle changes, including limiting dietary salt intake to less than 2,000 mg per day, reducing caffeine intake, and limiting alcohol to one drink per day.

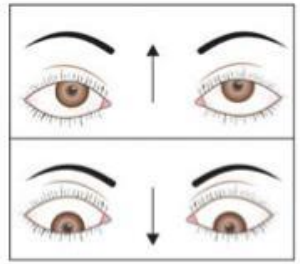
- Daily thiazide diuretic therapy can be added if vertigo is not controlled with lifestyle changes.

- Transtympanic injections of glucocorticoids and gentamicin can improve vertigo.
  - Transtympanic gentamicin is associated with hearing loss and should be reserved for patients who already have significant hearing loss.

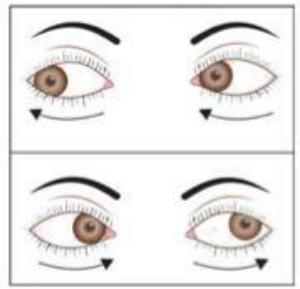
MENIERE DISEASE

- Vestibular suppressant medications may be used for acute attacks.
  - Prochlorperazine, promethazine, and diazepam (Valium) have been effective.
- Surgery is an option for patients with refractory symptoms.
- Vestibular exercises may be helpful for patients with unilateral peripheral vestibular dysfunction.
- Vestibular rehabilitation may be needed for persistent tinnitus or hearing loss.

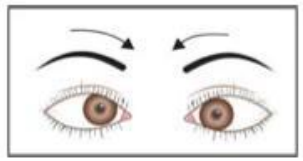
Exercises in bed



- Looking up and then down



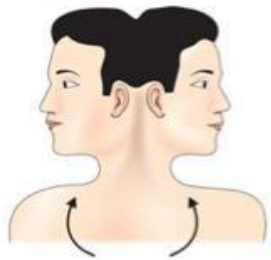
- Looking alternatively left and right



- Convergence exercises

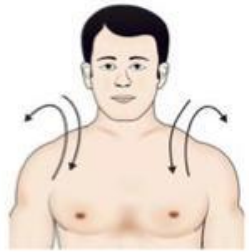
Head movements

- Bending alternately forward and backward



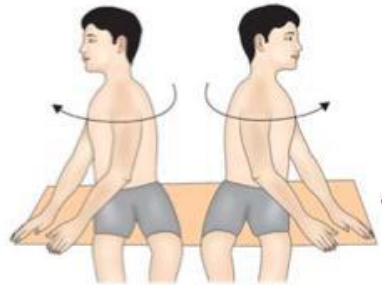
- Turning alternately to left and then right

Exercises in sitting position



- Shrugging and rotating shoulders

- Bending forward and picking up objects



- Turning head and trunk alternately to the left and right

Fig. 7: Cawthorne-Cooksey exercises

Central Etiologies

- The vestibular nuclei, cerebellum, brainstem, spinal cord, and vestibular cortex make up the central vestibular system.
- Central abnormalities cause approximately 25% of dizziness experienced by patients.
- Common central etiologies include vestibular migraine and vertebrobasilar ischemia.
- Patients with central pathology may present with disequilibrium and ataxia rather than true vertigo. However, vertigo can be a presenting symptom of an impending cerebrovascular event.

Central Etiologies

- Potentially deadly central causes of acute vestibular syndrome may mimic a more benign peripheral disorder, and a stroke may present with no focal neurologic signs.

- Computed tomography does not have adequate sensitivity to distinguish stroke from benign causes of acute vestibular syndrome.

- The HINTS examination is highly sensitive and specific in identifying stroke in patients with acute vestibular syndrome, and it is superior to diffusion-weighted magnetic resonance imaging in ruling out stroke.

VESTIBULAR MIGRAINE

- Episodic vertigo in a patient with a history of migraine headaches suggests vestibular migraine.
- Vestibular migraine is one of the most common causes of episodic vertigo among children.
- Among adults, it is three times more common among women and more often occurs between 20 and 50 years of age.
- A family history of vestibular migraine is a risk factor.

VESTIBULAR MIGRAINE

The diagnostic criteria for vestibular migraine include:

- At least five episodes of vestibular symptoms of moderate or severe intensity lasting five minutes to 72 hours.
- Current or previous history of migraine headache.
- One or more migraine features.
- At least 50% with vestibular symptoms; and no other cause of vestibular symptoms.

VESTIBULAR MIGRAINE

- Initial management focuses on identifying and avoiding migraine triggers.
- Stress relief is recommended, and adequate sleep and exercise are encouraged.
- Vestibular suppressant medications are helpful.
- Preventive medications include anticonvulsants, beta adrenergic blockers, calcium channel blockers, tricyclic antidepressants, butterbur extract, and magnesium.
- The goal is a 50% reduction in attacks.

VERTEBROBASILAR ISCHEMIA

- The blood supply to the brainstem, cerebellum, and inner ear is derived from the vertebrobasilar system.
  - Any major branch occlusion can cause vertigo.

- Diagnosis usually relies on a history of brainstem symptoms, such as diplopia, dysarthria, weakness, or clumsiness of the limbs.
  - Vertigo is the initial symptom in 48% of patients, although fewer than one-half will have an associated neurologic finding.

- Treatment includes antiplatelet therapy and reduction of risk factors for cerebrovascular disease.
  - Warfarin (Coumadin) has been used in cases of significant vertebral or basilar artery stenosis.

SORT: KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Clinical recommendation	*Evidence rating*	*References*
Vertigo associated with unilateral hearing loss should raise suspicion for Meniere disease.	C	41
The physical examination in patients with dizziness should include orthostatic blood pressure measurement, nystagmus assessment, and the Dix-Hallpike maneuver for triggered vertigo.	C	16
The HINTS (head-impulse, nystagmus, test of skew) examination can help differentiate a peripheral cause of vestibular neuritis from a central cause.	C	20
Laboratory testing and imaging are not recommended when no neurologic abnormality is found on examination.	C	1
Benign paroxysmal positional vertigo is treated with a canalith repositioning procedure (e.g., Epley maneuver).	A	30
Vestibular neuritis symptoms may be relieved with medication and vestibular rehabilitation.	C	20
Meniere disease may improve with a low-salt diet and diuretic use.	B	41

A = consistent, good-quality patient-oriented evidence; B = inconsistent or limited-quality patient-oriented evidence; C = consensus, disease-oriented evidence, usual practice, expert opinion, or case series. For information about the SORT evidence rating system, go to http://www.aafp.org/afpsort.