

Dizziness



Dizziness is the bane of my existence. It's my most persistent and irritating MS symptom. It's led to a long list of restricted activities: amusement park rides, drinking caffeine or alcohol, cartwheels, reading on a road trip, certain yoga positions.

Obviously, none of these activities are essential. But even with strict adherence to my self-imposed "dizziness avoidance rules," I still have those days when I can't escape that woozy, cloudy feeling that I call "dizziness" (because nothing else describes it quite as well).

How do I cope? It's not always easy.

In the early years after my MS diagnosis, I felt dizzy every minute of every day. Nothing seemed to make it better or worse. I tried everything: medications, physical therapy, dietary changes, more sleep, less sleep, more exercise, less exercise. I was powerless.

But gradually, my symptoms lessened. I have relapsing remitting MS, so some improvement wasn't surprising. I also started to discover some ways to manage my dizziness, or even reduce the chance that it would happen at all.

For others struggling with dizziness—or any other frustrating symptom, for that matter—here are some suggestions that may help you take your life back:

1. **Track your symptoms:** For a long time, I didn't really know if my dizziness was tied to sleep, mood, stress or anything else. So, I started to track my symptoms on a scale of 1-10 **and** the quality of my sleep, level of stress and mood/overall wellbeing. Then I looked for correlations over several weeks. I was surprised that I didn't find much

connection, but it was reassuring. If I couldn't sleep one night, I could remind myself that my insomnia didn't necessarily mean I would be dizzy the next day. If you have suspicions that certain foods, situations or activities are triggering (or improving) your symptoms, test out your theory and use that information to make some positive changes.

2. **Rule out other causes:** Dizziness is not a rare symptom of MS, but it is not the most common either. I have done hearing and visual tests, bloodwork, and have tried allergy medications to rule out other causes. I am now confident that my dizziness is due to MS. Unless your symptoms are an obvious consequence or your disease process, make sure you and your physician have investigated alternate explanations.
3. **Trial and error:** Although I never want my quest for a cure to take over my life, I have tried a range of treatments to see what might work. For me, acupuncture and restorative yoga provide brief relief. Visual therapy seemed to reduce my overall number of dizzy days. Although I sometimes cheat, avoiding caffeine helps. While I've opted for a mostly vegan diet for other reasons, I know that diet does **not** play much of a role in my dizziness. Trial and error helped me create the "avoidance rules" listed above, and it also allowed me to identify activities that are **unlikely** to cause dizziness.
4. **Meditate:** Nothing has helped me more than meditation to both reduce my dizziness and cope when I have it. I took a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) meditation class several years ago. I had hoped it might help with stress, but I had no expectation that it would give me a powerful tool to combat my most irritating MS symptom. By meditating for just a few minutes every morning and night, I reduce my odds of feeling dizzy. When I get dizzy, a 20-minute meditation session can sometimes stop my symptoms. Even when I have bad dizziness that won't go away, meditation helps. "This is the way it is right now," I remind myself. I acknowledge it, without judgement, and go on with my day.
5. **Practice self-care:** Regardless of your symptoms, you can feel better overall by prioritizing self-care. Follow a healthy diet, maintain nurturing friendships, reduce stress, exercise (find a way to get moving that you don't hate) and get enough sleep. If you are struggling with anxiety or depression (which are so common with MS and other chronic conditions), find a therapist who can provide guidance and support. Sometimes by focusing on self-care, you'll find that your prior symptoms will dissipate.