

Yoga for vestibular balance and dizziness disorders

Our sense of balance is a complex interaction of:

- The fluid-filled labyrinths of the inner ear, which monitor the direction of motion
- The eyes, which observe the environment and the direction of motion
- The skin, especially skin receptors in the feet, which give us our sense of the ground
- Muscle and joint sensory receptors, which report which parts of the body are moving
- The brain and the spinal cord, which put all the information together

Vestibular balance and dizziness disorders are often caused by infections or injuries to the inner or middle ear. The suggestions in this article come from my own experience with labyrinthitis, a viral infection that caused permanent damage to my inner ear and vestibular nerve. However, some of the suggestions may also be useful for other vestibular disorders (more information on the many types of vestibular disorders can be found at www.vestibular.org and at www.labyrinthitis.org.uk), and for balance and dizziness arising from menopause, ageing, head and spinal cord injuries, and herniated disks.

Those suffering from inner ear disorders can experience constant or episodic vertigo and dizziness, disorientation, poor coordination particularly in the feet and hands, and difficulties orienting themselves in space.

Subsidiary balance systems in the neck, spine and joints are over-utilised. These areas become tense, overworked and prone to injury.

Misalignment is common. People with balance and dizziness disorders create compensatory postural adjustments, such as turning the whole upper body to look to the side, or always looking down at the floor.

As well as postural adjustments, breathing can become shallow and rapid. Tension in the jaw, neck, upper chest and diaphragm develops with the 'extra effort' that is part of the body and mind's attempts to counter the imbalance and disorientation.

Deep fatigue is also very common, as the body and brain are working overtime to maintain posture, balance and spatial orientation.

There are a number of ways to modify a yoga practice in order to work with vestibular balance and dizziness disorders.

Modifying the practice

Practice against the wall. Practising against the wall protects the overworked neck, spine, joints and eyes. It also avoids and corrects compensatory postural adjustments. Practising in this way reduces fatigue, and brings quietness and rest. Practising facing the wall is particularly good when you are disoriented by movement and lights, as it minimises the impact of these visual disturbances.

Physical focus points. In balance and dizziness disorders, orienting the body in space is challenging, particularly in large and busy places like a yoga classroom. A physical focal point dramatically reduces this disorientation. During class, strap your head. I used a medical bandage, with a scarf over the top for aesthetic reasons!

If you're experiencing spinning sensations, mentally focussing on those body parts that are in touch with the earth can dramatically reduce the length of the spinning and the associated anxiety. If you experience spinning in a pose, come out and rest your forehead on the nearest firm surface – a wall

is good. If you're somewhere you don't want to draw attention to yourself, press your hand very firmly to your forehead, or to the base of your skull. Even clenching your hand tightly can work well too.

Use blocks under the head for standing forward bends like Uttanasana (standing half forward bend), and bolsters and chairs to rest the forehead in sitting forward bends like Paschimottanasana (seated forward bend).

Cover the eyes and head with a blanket during reclining poses and in Savasana (Corpse Pose). This allows the overworked eyes to rest deeply.

Breath. When practising, move your attention to the breath, and consciously relax and release tension in the jaw, neck, upper chest and diaphragm. This will also help with anxiety. Because rapid, shallow breathing can also increase dizziness, it's important to avoid this type of breathing.

When practising pranayama, try relaxing, rather than energising, breath sequences. Having a rolled bandage placed at the base of the skull provides an excellent grounding point. Nadi Sodhana (Alternate nostril breathing) is a good addition to a practice focussing on balance.

Working with nausea. Poses where the vision is soft and broad, such as shoulder stand, twists and forward bends, can induce nausea. Rapid, twisting or rocking movements (as in Dhanurasana, Bow Pose) can also increase nausea.

These poses can be reintroduced slowly with modifications. Supported shoulder stand with a chair and forward bends with bolsters and chairs for head support are a good place to start. Passive backbends over bolsters and chairs, or a backbender with a rolled blanket at the top of the head, are a good precursor to more active backbends.

Nausea also signals that you're pushing too hard and doing too much too soon. Come to rest in a pose like forward Sukhasana (Easy Pose) with your head on a bench and arms outstretched to help relieve the nausea.

Neck and shoulder tension. Dizziness can result from neck and shoulder tension. Constant tension in these areas may also be an underlying cause of tinnitus (constant or episodic ringing in the ears). A useful pose for relieving this tension is a resting Uttanasana in which both shoulders and outstretched arms are resting on Halasana boxes (wooden boxes about one metre high, chair backs are also useful) with the head hanging freely down between the shoulders, and the feet hip width or wider apart.

Also useful for tension in this area are forward bends with the forehead resting on a long low bench with the arms stretched out along the bench on either side, thus avoiding any unnecessary tightening of the shoulders and neck, and bringing relief to this area.

Yoga for recovery

Vestibular rehabilitation therapy is the most successful and widely used approach to correcting vestibular balance and dizziness disorders such as labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis. It is based on the principle that the brain's plasticity can be invoked to re-learn lost functions through regular repetition of exercises that stimulate these areas (see www.vestibular.org).

Yoga can also encourage the brain's plasticity and help it re-learn focus and balance, movement and coordination.

Focus and balance

Working with Tadasana is an invaluable starting point for recovering focus and balance. Use it to reconnect to the feet's balance points – the big toe, the inner heels, the spread of the sole of the foot on the floor – and gradually work through the pose from the feet up. This mindful exploration of Tadasana increases awareness of poor alignment resulting from postural adjustments and offers a way of working through this alignment safely with minimal challenges to balance and coordination. This exploration is the foundation for more challenging poses.

Tadasana can also be varied to include more challenging balances. Raising up on the toes, beginning one foot at a time, and raising the arms, again with the focus on connecting to the grounded points of the feet and to posture, is very useful. Tadasana can also be done with closed eyes to recover a sense of balance that doesn't rely so much on vision.

Once adept at balancing in Tadasana, and this may take some time, incorporate other stand balances such as Vrksasana (Tree Pose), Utthita Padangusthasana I and II, Garudhasana (Eagle Pose), Vasisthasana (Side Plank Pose) and Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose).

Begin practising these balances with the back against the wall or facing the wall, gradually moving away when balance improves. Use chairs and trestles to allow for a graduated reintroduction of these more challenging balances. For example, in Utthita Padangusthasana I and II, begin with the foot raised onto just one or two blocks, then increase the challenge by raising the height to a chair, a chair with a block/s, and the trestle, before attempting this pose without props.

Headstand can be useful, as it requires a steady and focussed gaze. However, because the neck and spine are so overworked, headstands should be practiced only once there has been significant recovery of balance and other functions lost during the illness, otherwise the tension in this area can be exacerbated.

Movement and coordination

People with vestibular disorders can be very sensitive to head movements. Bending forward from an upright position (as from Tadasana to Uttanasana), looking up to the ceiling (as in Trikonasana), or inverting the head (not only in inversions, but backbends, and even lying on the floor), can cause head spins, nausea and disorientation. Once standing balances and poses are mastered, and tiredness and nausea is no longer an issue, yoga can be useful for working with these problematic movements.

Pose transitions are a useful focal point. Try transitioning in and out of poses in different ways to incorporate different balances and head movements. For example, transition from Tadasana to Parsvottanasana (Pyramid Pose) by stepping one leg back, and moving out of the pose by bringing the feet together again. For this moving balance, keep the mind anchored on the front foot, particularly the base of the big toe, and at first move slowly.

Transitioning to standing poses through Ardha Mukha Svanasana (Dog Pose) or Prasarita Padottanasana (Wide-Legged Forward Bend) is also useful for broadening these moving balance skills.

Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) is very good for recovering movement and coordination, though should only be incorporated once balance and strength are significantly recovered. Start slowly, by reintroducing the Surya Namaskar sequence in parts, starting with moving from Ardha Mukha Svanasana (Dog Pose) to forward Virasana (Hero Pose).

Once the full sequence is reintroduced, incorporate extra movements that build resilience to problematic head movements that cause dizziness. For example, rather than moving the foot from

Ardha Mukha Svanasana to Ashva Sanchalāsana (Low Lunge Pose) just once, repeat this movement several times on each side.

This technique of repetition can also be used for working with problematic poses that involve challenging head movements. For example, moving into and out of Trikonāsana (Triangle Pose) and Pavrita Trikonāsana (Twisted Triangle Pose) on the breath encourages the body and mind to turn and twist more quickly without dizziness.

Cultivating gentleness, permission and interest

The modifications and poses offered in this article are merely one aspect of recovery. More important to recovery, and much harder, is developing a mental and emotional attitude of gentleness, permission and interest.

A core motivation of loving kindness and curiosity allows the practice to become a space for awareness and self-observation. The heightened anxiety that accompanies inner ear disorders offers the opportunity to really explore fear – what does it feel like, how does it manifest in the body and mind, how does it affect balance, what would it mean if one fell over? What are your ideas about how balance ‘should look’?

Sixteen months after contracting labyrinthitis, my eyes still can’t hold the environment steady when I move, I have vertigo in some positions, and poor coordination in my left hand. But I have significantly recovered my balance, my ability to walk, drive and remain steady in busy spaces, to work and participate in daily life. And once I eased off fighting the illness I could allow it to be a space to experiment and observe, which unexpectedly transformed and deepened my yoga practice, not least of which is a new appreciation of the otherwise unacknowledged work of the inner ear!

Happy balancing!