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Mènière's Disease

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What is Mènière's disease?

Mènière's disease is a disorder of the inner ear that causes severe dizziness (vertigo), ringing in the ears (tinnitus), hearing loss, and a feeling of fullness or congestion in the ear. Mènière's disease usually affects only one ear.

Attacks of dizziness may come on suddenly or after a short period of tinnitus or muffled hearing. Some people will have single attacks of dizziness separated by long periods of time. Others may experience many attacks closer together over a number of days. Some people with Mènière's disease have vertigo so extreme that they lose their balance and fall. These episodes are called "drop attacks."

Mènière's disease can develop at any age, but it is more likely to happen to adults between 40 and 60 years of age. The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) estimates that approximately 615,000 individuals in the United States are currently diagnosed with Mènière's disease and that 45,500 cases are newly diagnosed each year.

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What causes the symptoms of Mènière's disease?

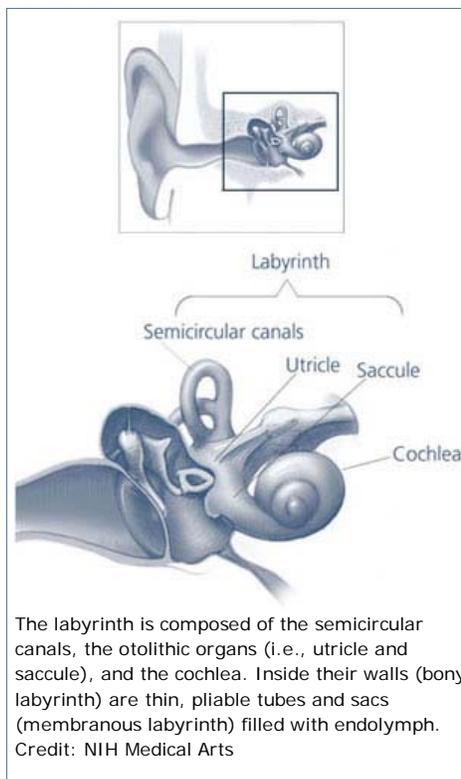
The symptoms of Mènière's disease are caused by the buildup of fluid in the compartments of the inner ear, called the labyrinth. The labyrinth contains the organs of balance (the semicircular canals and otolithic organs) and of hearing (the cochlea). It has two sections: the bony labyrinth and the membranous labyrinth. The membranous labyrinth is filled with a fluid called endolymph that, in the balance organs, stimulates receptors as the body moves. The receptors then send signals to the brain about the body's position and movement. In the cochlea, fluid is compressed in response to sound vibrations, which stimulates sensory cells that send signals to the brain.

In Mènière's disease, the endolymph buildup in the labyrinth interferes with the normal balance and hearing signals between the inner ear and the brain. This abnormality causes vertigo and other symptoms of Mènière's disease.

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Why do people get Mènière's disease?

Many theories exist about what happens to cause Mènière's disease, but no definite answers are available. Some researchers think that Mènière's disease is the result of constrictions in blood vessels similar to those that cause migraine headaches. Others think Mènière's disease could be a consequence of viral infections, allergies, or autoimmune reactions. Because Mènière's disease appears to run in families, it could also be the result of genetic variations that cause abnormalities in the volume or regulation of endolymph fluid.



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How does a doctor diagnose Ménière's

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Ménière's disease is most often diagnosed and treated by an otolaryngologist (commonly called an ear, nose, and throat doctor, or ENT). However, there is no definitive test or single symptom that a doctor can use to make the diagnosis. Diagnosis is based upon your medical history and the presence of:



☰ Two or more episodes of vertigo lasting at least 20 minutes each

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☰ Tinnitus

☰ Temporary hearing loss

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☰ A feeling of fullness in the ear

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Some doctors will perform a hearing test to establish the extent of hearing loss caused by Ménière's disease. To rule out other diseases, a doctor also might request magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or computed tomography (CT) scans of the brain. [NIDCD Intranet \(Staff Only\)](#)

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