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Mal De Debarquement

Mal De Debarquement (MDD), French for “disembarkment sickness,” is a syndrome characterized by a persistent sensation of rocking and swaying upon return to land after a sea voyage. It remains a little known or understood disorder of the body’s balance system, including the vestibular system of the inner ears, the eyes, and the musculo-skeletal sensors. The level of awareness of the condition is low among both the general population and health professionals, leading to misunderstanding and misdiagnosis.

In MDD, sensations of swinging, swaying, unsteadiness, and disequilibrium persist for an excessive length of time after an ocean cruise, plane flight, automobile trip, or other motion experience such as riding on a Ferris wheel or even sleeping on a waterbed. Such uncomfortable sensations may last for six months or a year or even many years.

A survey of adults with chronic MDD showed that it occurred most often in middle-aged females after disembarking from a boat/cruise trip. Symptoms of the disorder were numerous and included the following: anxiety, difficulty maintaining balance, concentration, problems, depression, dizziness, ear pain, fatigue, headaches, head tremors, memory problems, general motion sensation, rocking, spaced-out feeling, ear fullness and tinnitus. Specific pre-existing conditions included a cold, ear infection, fatigue, nasal infection, sinus infection, and stress.

In this perplexing condition, the balance portion of the brain appears unable to readapt to a lack of movement after successfully adapting to the experience of continuous motion. It may be a variant of motion sickness or of migraine.

The diagnosis of MDD is made by a combination of a positive history along with the exclusion of other ear disorders. Hearing and balance tests are generally normal.

At present, no drugs or medical treatment work for all patients, and medications that help with other forms of dizziness or motion sickness are usually ineffective. Some treatments have been reported that have limited success, such as vestibular rehabilitation therapy, diuretics, anti-seizure and anti-anxiety drugs, and antidepressants.

With no established cause or cure, more research is needed to find out why some people return from a trip with a constant feeling that they are “walking on a trampoline.”