

# Vestibular Syndrome in Cats

A Brief Guide • Part of the Educational Pet Disease Series from Lap of Love

## Signs & Symptoms

### Initial Symptoms

- Facial drooping
- Rapid eye movement
- Head tilt
- Hugging the walls
- Drunken gait
- Sudden hearing loss (rare)

### Intermediate Symptoms

- Falling over to one side
- Disorientation
- Trouble eating/drinking
- Circling and rolling
- Dull mentation
- Sudden vision loss (rare)

### Advanced Symptoms

- Reclusive behavior
- Vomiting/motion sickness
- Staggering and stumbling
- Weight loss
- Diarrhea
- Seizures (rare)

### Crisis Situations Requiring Immediate Medical Intervention

- Difficulty breathing/panting
- Unable to walk
- Blue gums and/or tongue
- Sudden collapse
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Yowling in pain
- Seizures

## What Is It?

Feline Vestibular Syndrome (FVS) is a group of diseases that affect the vestibular system, which is responsible for identifying and correcting imbalance through sensors located within the ear and neurological centers of the brain. These sensors detect the position of the cat's head in relation to the body and relay the positional information to the control centers in the brain. These messages are then sent from the brain to the body to help the cat maintain its balance. When the vestibular system is dysfunctional, an affected cat may change from walking normally to stumbling and falling to one side, unable to correct their balance.

There are two broad categories of vestibular syndrome: **central vestibular disease (CVD)** and **peripheral vestibular disease (PVD)**. Central vestibular disease arises from a brain lesion such as cancer or infection. Peripheral vestibular disease occurs in response to an insult to the nerves associated with the ear and brain. Common causes of peripheral vestibular disease include bacterial infections, drug reactions, and tissue growths like polyps or masses in the ear canal. Cats most commonly experience a type of peripheral vestibular disease called **idiopathic vestibular disease (IVD)**, for which no determined cause exists. Idiopathic disease develops fast and resolves within days to weeks. The symptoms are typically temporary and harmless, characterized by a drunken gait, falling over, motion sickness, and rapid eye movements. Cats of all ages, genders, and breeds are susceptible, though geriatric cats may be overrepresented. Beyond IVD, brain tumors and ear infections are common causes. IVD is documented in cats of any age, gender, or breed with those in the northeast commonly affected during late summer and early fall.

## Diagnosis

Diagnosis of vestibular disease requires a detailed history of the symptoms and a physical examination. The symptoms present help categorize the syndrome as central or peripheral which in turn dictates treatment and prognosis. After the initial diagnosis of the type of vestibular disease, the focus shifts to determining the underlying cause(s). Central vestibular disease, due to a suspected brain tumor, may require advanced imaging (MRI, CT) and a biopsy for a definitive diagnosis. Peripheral vestibular disease, if due to an underlying ear infection, may require ear cytology, scope, sedated exam, flush, and culture. Basic bloodwork and infectious disease panels, such as screening for feline leukemia and tick-borne infections, are advised on an individual basis. Because no known cause of idiopathic disease exists, the diagnosis is based on symptom presence and resolution, physical exam, and excluding other diseases.

## Treatment and Management

Treatment of vestibular disease is dependent on the cause. For middle ear infections, this may include long term antibiotics and treatment of the ear drum. Central lesions, such as a brain tumor, may require surgery. Idiopathic disease, though the most common, has no specific treatment. Symptomatic treatment for motion sickness, nausea, and anxiety are common. Any diagnosis of vestibular syndrome in general warrants environmental modification to provide a safe, confined area with accessible food, water, and bedding. Limiting external stimulation such as kids, noise, television, bright lights, and other pets can reduce anxiety and allow the pet to rest more effectively. Further palliative care may include assisted feeding and administering fluids at home in severe cases.

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continued from page 1

## Prognosis

The prognosis for feline vestibular syndrome depends on the underlying cause as well. Some ear infections and infectious diseases can be treated successfully. Central disease due to any type of tumor carries a poor prognosis. Idiopathic disease carries a good prognosis as the symptoms typically resolve on their own. Some neurological changes, such as a head tilt and loss of balance, can persist with or without treatment. Consult with your veterinarian and a veterinary neurologist, if necessary, to determine the most likely type of vestibular disease present, as this will be the most effective way of obtaining an accurate prognosis and comprehensive treatment/management plan.

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## Management Tips

### Consider providing:

- Easily accessible food and water
- Canned food instead of dry kibble
- Warm, soft sleeping areas
- Ramps and mobility aids if needed
- Access to "safe" quiet areas
- Gates to block stairs to prevent falls
- Modifying surfaces to increase traction
- Natural calming products
- Motion sickness medication
- Multiple litter boxes with low sides, in easy-to-access locations

### Try to:

- Be consistent with medications
- Track appetite, fluid intake, energy, weight, etc.
- Keep up with preventative care
- Avoid taking cat in car car, unless necessary
- Keep furniture arrangement stable
- Provide safe confinement, if needed
- Pad sharp corners and remove breakables
- Limit bright lights, but provide night lights
- Limit fast visual stimulation (television)
- Limit stimulation while recovering
- Limit stress (kids, noise)

Before your pet's condition becomes unmanageable or their quality of life declines, it is important to begin end-of-life care discussions. Learn about pet hospice care and/or euthanasia services in your area so you are prepared.