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Unsteady ground: understanding the problem of BPPV in the world of sports

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Abstract:

Introduction: Dizziness and Vertigo are one of the most common symptoms presented by patients, often the symptoms are caused by BPPV. BPPV may be provoked by certain types of impacts, head motion and other various factors including sport practice. In modern world, sport has become a part of everyday life, both in professional and amateur matter. Different sports, may lead to different types of injuries and related complications, one of them is dizziness and vertigo. We investigated the existing data about the prevalence of BPPV related to certain types of physical activity. Different sports vary in the movement profile, amount and frequency of impacts. Furthermore, the injuries resulting from physical activity are not always associated with direct hits. Presenting all at once: the data, diagnostic and treatment strategy, we resume the existing knowledge on the phenomenon of BPPV in physical activity.

Purpose of work: The article was completed to analyze the available data on the prevalence of BPPV in sports practitioners. This aims to facilitate the prompt resolution of vertigo symptoms in affected individuals and to identify potential, less obvious risk factors that may predispose athletes to this condition.

State of Knowledge: Even though the knowledge about the etiology and risk factors of BPPV has significantly advanced in the last decade, more than half of all cases are still classified as idiopathic. While data on possible new risk factors is growing, it often consists of case

reports or original studies with small sample sizes, limiting its generalizability. It is widely believed though that certain types of movement may play a role in triggering BPPV.

Material and methods: This article is based on a comprehensive review of the literature, conducted using PubMed and Google Scholar. The research focused on studies concerning the prevalence, etiology and risk factors of BPPV, particularly in sports practitioners.

Keywords: BPPV; Vertigo; Sports;

Introduction

Dizziness and vertigo are conditions frequently approached in medical care. Some studies show that over 30% of the general public will experience at least one episode in their lifetime.¹ Patients often describe their symptoms as loss of balance with a subjective sensation of movement of the environment around them. It is estimated that up to 25% of patients treated because of vertigo are diagnosed as benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV).² BPPV results from calcium carbonate crystals being dislocated into semicircular canals, provoking the subjective feeling of head motion. The majority of cases are of idiopathic origin, however, several risk factors have been identified. Evidence suggests a possible correlation between physical activity and the prevalence of BPPV, showing that the condition is not always directly linked to impacts or head trauma.³ Due to specific types of mechanical stress, movements, and physical impacts associated with certain sports, the likelihood of developing BPPV appears to vary and is elevated in certain groups. Having selected a few sports with varying characteristics, we investigated the possible reasons for the increased prevalence of this type of vertigo. This review aims to summarize the current evidence on this topic.

Pathomechanism of BPPV

The vestibular system of the inner ear consists of the semicircular canals, utricle, saccule and vestibular nerve. The semicircular canals are responsible for detecting angular head movements. The utricle contains otoconia, calcium carbonate crystals that play a crucial role in sensing linear acceleration.⁴ Sometimes, due to various reasons, these otoconia can move

into semicircular canals, causing episodes of vertigo accompanied by nystagmus, the symptoms are typically triggered by head position changes. This phenomenon, called BPPV, impacts significantly quality of life if left untreated.⁵ The posterior semicircular canal is the most common site for otoconia displacement, it's because of it's anatomical orientation. The horizontal semicircular canal is the second most frequently affected site (HC-BPPV), while the least common is the BPPV originating from the anterior semicircular canal.⁶ The severity of experienced vertigo is influenced by the specific mechanism and extent of the migration.

According to widely accepted theory behind the pathophysiology of BPPV, the otoconia can either “free-float” in an semicircular canal (canalolithiasis) or adhere to the cupula (cupulolithiasis).⁶ In both cases the receptors become overstimulated, leading to episodes of vertigo and nystagmus, however the cupulolithiasis adhesion seems to results in higher persistence of symptoms.⁷

Diagnosis

The Barany society established criteria for BPPV diagnostics.⁸ According to the criteria, a vertigo episode can be classified as BPPV if the recurrent attacks of vertigo are provoked by positional shifts, with positional nystagmus induced by maneuver relevant for BPPV subtype and affected site. The nystagmus however is not always evident. Practicians find Frenzel goggles and video oculography useful in nystagmus observation and classification. Accurate classification of BPPV is critical because missclassification may cause the repositioning maneuvers to be ineffective and in some cases exacerbate the condition.⁸ Furthermore, symptoms of dizziness and vertigo can have various underlying causes that must be carefully differentiated. Relying solely on an initial diagnosis may lead to overlooking alternative explanations. For these reasons, a careful assessment and classification are essential to ensure proper management.

The posterior canal (PC-BPPV) is typically involved (over 80% of cases), with minor incidence of horizontal and anterior canal BPPV.⁵ PC-BPPV is normally diagnosed through Dix-Hallpike test.⁹ During the test, patient initially sits upright on an examination couch, head is turned 45° to the tested side, then the patient is quickly moved to lying down with the head hanging 20-30° off the table. The eyes are then closely observes for signs of nystagmus, simultaneously the patient is asked if they experience any sensation of vertigo. The horizontal

canal BPPV is approached less often. It is diagnosed through supine roll test and demands different treatment strategy. In supine roll test, the eyes are observed in search of nystagmus in supine position with head 30° elevated. During the test, the head is turned 90° to the sides.⁶ The abnormal eye movements typically beat stronger towards the affected side. This intensity helps identify which ear is involved. Moreover, the type of nystagmus observed during the tests can indicate the specific variant of BPPV.⁶

Risk factors

As noted earlier the BPPV is most often classified as idiopathic.⁶ Efforts are focused on identifying risk factors and situations that may increase susceptibility to BPPV. Over the years several risk factors have been identified and described. The syndrome is most often associated with Aging, Meniere's disease, Migraine, Trauma, Vitamin D deficiency, and more less pronounced.¹⁰

The phenomenon of trauma-related BPPV is multifaceted, as the origin of traumatic injuries is diverse and encompasses a wide spectrum of contributing factors. Earlier research has reported traffic accidents, head trauma, dental or temporal bone surgery to be significant for BPPV prevalence.^{10,11} Some recent analyses suggest that trauma related BPPV may account for up to one-fifth of cases and compared to BPPV of other origins, its presentation is more severe. The treatment of trauma related BPPV is considered to be more complex, symptoms tend to be recurrent and demand repetitive maneuvers to resolve. Trauma not only displaces the otoconia, it may also have significant influence of surrounding issues, increasing the likelihood of developing the syndrome.¹¹

Physical activities, especially in the context of professional sport practice are often correlated with an increased predisposition to trauma related incidents. Because of repetitive strain, high impact forces in competitive sports, the risk of head injuries and the possible inner ear abnormalities is amplified. Not only have we considered activities involving direct impacts, we also decided to investigate sports that don't necessarily involve abrupt strains. Instead, these sports involve specific types of movement or constant vibrations, which may cause the otoconia to dislodge and result in symptoms of BPPV.

American Football and Football (Soccer)

Soccer is widely regarded as the most popular sport globally, with nearly 130 000 active professional players around the world, according to FIFA's Professional Football Report.¹² This figure does not account for the vast number of people playing casually. In contrast, American Football, as reported by National Football Foundation, involves over one million active participants both professional and amateur, within the United States.¹³

American Football and Soccer are both sports characterized by a high incidence of repetitive collisions, though the nature of these impacts varies between the two. In american football, the mechanism of head injuries is defined by high frequency of high-energy collisions. On the other hand, in soccer along with direct impacts between the players, the practice of repetitive ball heading introduces an additional risk factor.¹⁴ While we recognize the differences in injury mechanisms between these sports, for the purposes of classification, they have been grouped together due to shared characteristics such as frequent direct head impacts and rapid acceleration-deceleration movement patterns.

Recurrent BPPV has already been reported in connection with soccer and american football practice. Although direct studies focusing specifically on these sports are limited, the available research provides significant insights. Kerrigan et al. presented that athletes involved in football and soccer represent a substantial proportion of young adults diagnosed and treated for BPPV. Of the 200 individuals observed, football players accounted for 36% and soccer players for 22%.¹⁵

Gökler et al. reviewed a group of 63 american footballers and discovered a increased prevalence of BPPV in this group. They defined the weekly training hours and years of practice as risk factors for BPPV.¹⁶

Regarding soccer, we identified two case reports in the literature. Burrows et al. and Warming et al. described two patients, soccer players, diagnosed with BPPV.^{17,18} Both cases suggest, that while various risk factors may play a role, though the repetitive heading, and rapid head angular movements possibly contribute to BPPV development. Both individuals were successfully treated with repositioning maneuvers. One of the individuals demonstrated a particularly quick recovery, returning to their standard training regimen within just 24 hours.

Given the importance of these sports to many athletes, both at amateur and professional levels, identifying the condition and applying effective strategies is crucial. However, further research is essential to better understand this association and develop appropriate preventive measures.

Combat sports

The matter becomes even more compelling in high-impact sports, where the force of substantial momentum is predominantly focused on the head, often and repeatedly targeting the temporal regions. The mean punch force delivered in a professional boxing match was measured to account for around 1000N, however, depending on the technique, weight class and various other factors it may account for over 5000N.^{19,20} During a match multiple punches are landed, in a match of 12 rounds it is estimated that around 50- 80 punches are thrown per round.²¹

Combat sports have already been proven to affect the body in many ways. The central nervous system is just one among other systems influenced, the competitors suffer from acute skeletal and vascular trauma: among others, cases of carotid artery dissection have been described.²²

Within the central nervous system, damage can be both acute and chronic. Acutely, due to direct hits and falls, the incidence of concussion and subdural hematoma is increased. Chronically the repeating brain trauma leads to chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). Symptoms of CTE include difficulty with memory, irritability, depression, problems with self-control, Parkinsonism, all accompanied by progressive dementia.²³

Concussion is a mild brain traumatic injury, arising from the brain jolting between skull walls after hits. It's higher incidence leads to increased prevalence of post-concussive dizziness (PCD), a syndrome observed after head injuries, characterized by balance

disturbances and persistent dizziness.²⁴ The BPPV was described as the most frequent et persistent reason for PCD. Depending on the study, it may be a reason for up to 57% of dizziness cases following head injuries.²⁵ A recent study investigating vestibular and oculomotor functions impairment in combat sport athletes shows that more than half of the athletes participating in the study showed some abnormalities in tested functions. However, there was no difference between the experimental and the control group concerning the presence of BPPV.²⁶ The complexity of the phenomenon in this group highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach. Given the increased prevalence of vertigo, it remains clear that the BPPV should be prioritized as a primary diagnostic consideration when evaluating the symptoms.

Swimming

The involvement of BPPV in sports carrying a high risk of trauma appears more intuitive compared to its association with swimming. The existing research primarily consists of case reports and limited data, still in swimming the movement pattern remains extremely repetitive within certain styles – seeming plausible to cause the BPPV. Songül et al. designed a study to determine whether regular swimming training increases the risk of BPPV.

The initial hypothesis suggested that crawl is likely to cause BPPV due to its biomechanical characteristics – the rapid rotational head movements around the body's longitudinal axis. Thirty swimmers participated in the study, four of them presented vertigo later diagnosed as BPPV.²⁷

All of them developed PC-BPPV and were successfully treated with Epley maneuver. The phenomenon of vertigo in swimmers presents a multifaceted challenge. In another case study about a swimmer experiencing BPPV, authors point out that the etiology is not always evident.²⁸ Swimming exposes the body to significant thermal fluctuations, which may contribute to the onset of vertigo. Additionally, the literature has documented a case where vertigo in swimmer was attributed to a cerebellar stroke.²⁹ As with combat sports, multiple factors must be taken into account. It is challenging to draw conclusions about the effects of other swimming styles on the onset or exacerbation of BPPV. However, we hypothesize that the relatively stable positioning of the head during these techniques may result in a reduced

likelihood of provoking the condition. This is based on the reduced frequency of rapid angular head movements.

Mountain biking

Off- road biking is characterized by a high frequency of acceterations, jumps, landings and the potential for falls, all of which contribute to its intense physical demands. What is noteworthy, however, is the continuous exposure to vibrations, which can have a significant impact on the vestibular system. The matter was described latter in relation to military training related activities and surprisingly, whole body vibration training plate use.³⁰

Acordding to the article of Vibert et al., this sport may be associated with a higher susceptibility to BPPV. Authors presented four cases of bikers experiencing episodes of vertigo after intensive off-road bike rides, all of them were later diagnosed and treated as BPPV.³¹

In this instance, the authors describe a potential mechanism for the displacement of otoconia, which occurs due to both rapid vertical accelerations and decelerations during jumps and landings, in combination with simultaneous head protraction-retraction movements. The impact generated during landing itself can result in vertical acceleration exceeding 2g, and is further compounded by rapid forward and backward movements of the neck.

These combines forces create a movement pattern similar to that of whiplash injuries, which have already been described as a factor increasing the potential for BPPV development.³²

Treatment

The BPPV can remit naturally, however the repositioning meneuvers have been established as a standard way of treatement.² Over years many maneuvers of different rate of success were described, these are Epley, Semont, Lempert (Barbecue Roll Maneuver) and Gufoni maneuvers.⁶ Different terapeutic strategies are applied depending on the specific type of BPPV, which has to be diagnosed as outlined in one of the previous sections. The

repositioning maneuvers aim to guide the displaced particles back into their correct location within the inner ear. The Epley maneuver, recognized as the gold standard, was first described in early 1990 and has demonstrated high efficacy in relieving symptoms of PC-BPPV.³³

The procedure begins with the patient seated upright on the examination couch. The physician then turns the patient's head towards the affected site, before lying them back, with the head extended 20-30° beyond the edge of the table. Next, the head is carefully rotated 90° to the unaffected side. In the following position, the patient rolled onto their side, with the head rotated further toward the ground. Finally, the individual is brought back to an upright sitting position.

The approach for the HC-BPPV differs, as the semicircular canal plate is differently oriented. The methods of choice are Gufoni and Lempert's maneuvers.

All the repositioning sequences are designed to guide the dislodged particles to the utricle using gravitational forces. To perform maneuvers effectively, time intervals between position changes should account for around 20-30 seconds. The efficacy increases as the maneuvers are repeated, relieving symptoms in over 80% of the affected individuals.³⁴ We would like to highlight the fact that the current evidence regarding the effectiveness and outcomes of the HC-BPPV remains limited, especially compared to PC-BPPV. As acknowledged by the authors, further comprehensive research is necessary to strengthen the existing data and provide more definitive conclusions.³⁵

Historically, certain post-repositioning instructions were believed to increase the effectiveness of BPPV treatment. These included specific postural guidelines for patients to follow after the procedure, recommendations regarding sleeping positions, and other movement restrictions.³⁶ Additionally, some researchers suggested the application of vibration to the mastoid process during the maneuvers as a potential method to improve outcomes.^{35,36} However, these approaches have not been proven to significantly improve treatment efficacy. Authors reviewing various management strategies have emphasized that the repositioning maneuvers themselves, when performed correctly, constitute a sufficient and effective treatment for BPPV.³⁶ Nevertheless, they acknowledge the need for further research to validate these findings.

Conclusions

Vertigo is a condition commonly encountered by physicians with one of the most frequent, and relatively treatable causes being BPPV. Among the various factors contributing to its occurrence, certain sports practices appear to notably increase its prevalence. However, despite its clinical relevance, the evidence remains limited. Nevertheless, existing analyses, have identified specific types of physical activities that may elevate the risk, and it is advised that every sport professional suffering from vertigo undergoes thorough evaluation and diagnosis, with particular consideration for potential BPPV.¹¹ The BPPV significantly declines the quality of life if left untreated.

For athletes, whose performance heavily depends on balance, BPPV can have even more profound consequences, potentially disrupting training routines and competitive capabilities. Identifying the heightened prevalence of BPPV in these groups is therefore critical for ensuring timely diagnosis and effective treatment, guarding both their health and athletic potential.

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Conceptualization: WN

Methodology: WN

Formal analysis: WN

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Resources: JM, SM, WN, PK

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Writing- review and editing: IS, SM, JW

Visualization: WN, ZK, MG

Supervision: WN, IS, JW

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