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Rare malady strikes cruising women over forty

August 25, 10:59 PM - Houston Women's Health Examiner - Susan Murphy

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Photo: Rapidfire

If you are over forty, female, and planning a cruise, you may want to reconsider your vacation plans. Reports are surfacing of forty-something-year-old women who are returning home from their fun in the sun and bringing along a souvenir they never bargained for, a rare condition known as Mal de Debarquement (MDD) or "disembarkment" syndrome.

A type of rocking sensation or feeling of imbalance that occurs after prolonged exposure to motion, MDD most often affects women between 40-50 years of age soon

after returning to land after a seven-day cruise. "I feel a rolling sensation – like I'm still at sea," said Sally Meadows, 44, who celebrated her 20-year wedding anniversary on a cruise. "After nearly a year of feeling off-balance, I fear it will never go away."

Statistics are somewhat scarce on MDD, but studies have been conducted with subjects who have had the condition for as long as 10 years. The average duration was 3.5 years, experienced by people in a study conducted in 1999 by Dr. Timothy Hain, Professor of Neurology, Otolaryngology at Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago.

Though the specific functional cause for MDD is unknown, it appears that the syndrome is a failure of the vestibular system to readapt correctly to stable ground. A theory is that the motion encountered on a boat or airplane is captured as a "memory" within the vestibular and it fails to reorient once that stimulus is removed. Other suspected causes include hormonal imbalances, central nervous abnormalities, migranes or depression.

Some MDD sufferers find that riding in a car suppresses the sensation of motion. Though there is no known cure, physical therapy has been suggested as a way to alleviate the symptoms in the short term. Staying active by running or walking is recommended. A person with MDD should avoid further exposure – boarding another cruise may not be a good idea.

"I really got my money's worth on my anniversary cruise," said Meadows. "Hopefully, it won't be feeling that lasts a lifetime."

Contact Suzmurphy07@comcast.net.

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SPS says:

I had my first episode at only 14 years old from flying on an airplane. I'm 28 now and have been affected for weeks following any airplane or boat ride.

Still, the scare tactic of reconsidering a cruise because you might come down with this disorder is a bit extreme. I wonder if more 40-50 year olds are getting MdDs because most people go on their first cruises around that age. How does the percentage of 20 year olds who go on cruises compare to 50 year olds? I bet 50 year olds are MUCH more likely to be on a cruise or doing the type of travel that usually triggers this.

September 14, 12:45 AM

Suzi says:

I am a 3 year "surviving sufferer" who has been diagnosed with MDDS. I did NOT get this from cruising! Mine occurred after 6 months of vertigo. Possibly, my brain is locked into the memory of the spinning effects of vertigo....there is much more to learn about this malady. Please check out www.mddsfoundation.org for accurate and up to date information.

September 13, 11:17 AM

Deb says:

Dear Susan,

Perhaps you would like to contact the MdDS Balance Disorder Foundation for information on Mal de Debarquement syndrome. I have personally been in touch with 3 of the members of Dr. Hain's 1999 survey study, they are still rocking. Our organization has survey data from hundreds of people with MdDS including men and women of all ages and walks of life.

We thank you for writing an article about this syndrome but encourage you to contact us at mddsfoundation@yahoo.com for more information. You might be surprised to find that it is not only cruises that are associated with MdDS but also plane, train, and car travel.

Looking forward to corresponding with you,
Deb
MdDS Balance Disorder Foundation

September 13, 9:40 AM

Marla says:

I am the moderator of the MdDS support group at Yahoogroups.com. We have over 1000 members now. I disagree with the suggestion that people with MdDS should run. Walking outside is recommended but many people can't run due to their imbalance. I had to hang onto furniture or touch a wall when walking so I don't see how I would have been able to run. I use a cane to walk outside. Physical therapy has proven ineffective for most people with MdDS. Riding in a car does make us feel better while the car is in motion but we feel worse when the journey ends. Lengthy car travel has been known to trigger higher symptoms for most of us.

September 13, 9:16 AM

mddsdarling says:

Six years and counting with MdDS from plane flight. www.mddsfoundation.org

September 12, 9:40 PM

Pamela M. says:

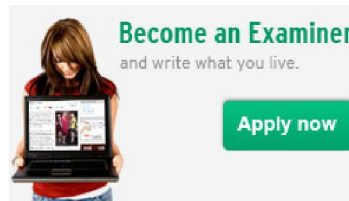
Interesting article - I know someone that has suffered from this - I hope to go on a cruise in the near future - hope that doesn't happen to me !

September 6, 8:48 PM

Jessica Wells says:

I went on a cruise last year and we are leaving on October 4th for another one. I am 42 and did not have any problems. I hope I don't this time either. We were on the ship for 7 days. We are doing the same cruise again just different excursions at the Ports.

September 2, 4:37 PM



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