

50% of patients and also allows stratification of patients at risk for cardiac mortality.

**Laboratory Tests** Baseline laboratory blood tests are rarely helpful in identifying the cause of syncope. Blood tests should be performed when specific disorders, e.g., myocardial infarction, anemia, and secondary autonomic failure, are suspected (Table 27-2).

**Autonomic Nervous System Testing (Chap. 454)** Autonomic testing, including tilt-table testing, can be performed in specialized centers. Autonomic testing is helpful to uncover objective evidence of autonomic failure and also to demonstrate a predisposition to neurally mediated syncope. Autonomic testing includes assessments of parasympathetic autonomic nervous system function (e.g., heart rate variability to deep respiration and a Valsalva maneuver), sympathetic cholinergic function (e.g., thermoregulatory sweat response and quantitative sudomotor axon reflex test), and sympathetic adrenergic function (e.g., blood pressure response to a Valsalva maneuver and a tilt-table test with beat-to-beat blood pressure measurement). The hemodynamic abnormalities demonstrated on tilt-table test (Figs. 27-3 and 27-4) may be useful in distinguishing orthostatic hypotension due to autonomic failure from the hypotensive bradycardic response of neurally mediated syncope. Similarly, the tilt-table test may help identify patients with syncope due to immediate or delayed orthostatic hypotension.

Carotid sinus massage should be considered in patients with symptoms suggestive of carotid sinus syncope and in patients over age 50 years with recurrent syncope of unknown etiology. This test should only be carried out under continuous ECG and blood pressure monitoring and should be avoided in patients with carotid bruits, plaques, or stenosis.

**Cardiac Evaluation** ECG monitoring is indicated for patients with a high pretest probability of arrhythmia causing syncope. Patients should be monitored in hospital if the likelihood of a life-threatening arrhythmia is high, e.g., patients with severe structural or coronary artery disease, nonsustained ventricular tachycardia, trifascicular heart block, prolonged QT interval, Brugada syndrome ECG pattern, or family history of sudden cardiac death (Table 27-1). Outpatient Holter monitoring is recommended for patients who experience frequent syncopal episodes (one or more per week), whereas loop recorders, which continually record and erase cardiac rhythm, are indicated for patients with suspected arrhythmias with low risk of sudden cardiac death. Loop recorders may be external (recommended for evaluation of episodes that occur at a frequency of greater than one per month) or implantable (if syncope occurs less frequently).

Echocardiography should be performed in patients with a history of cardiac disease or if abnormalities are found on physical examination or the ECG. Echocardiographic diagnoses that may be responsible for syncope include aortic stenosis, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, cardiac tumors, aortic dissection, and pericardial tamponade. Echocardiography also has a role in risk stratification based on the left ventricular ejection fraction.

Treadmill exercise testing with ECG and blood pressure monitoring should be performed in patients who have experienced syncope during or shortly after exercise. Treadmill testing may help identify exercise-induced arrhythmias (e.g., tachycardia-related AV block) and exercise-induced exaggerated vasodilation.

Electrophysiologic studies are indicated in patients with structural heart disease and ECG abnormalities in whom noninvasive investigations have failed to yield a diagnosis. Electrophysiologic studies have low sensitivity and specificity and should only be performed when a high pretest probability exists. Currently, this test is rarely performed to evaluate patients with syncope.

**Psychiatric Evaluation** Screening for psychiatric disorders may be appropriate in patients with recurrent unexplained syncope episodes. Tilt-table testing, with demonstration of symptoms in the absence of hemodynamic change, may be useful in reproducing syncope in patients with suspected psychogenic syncope.

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## Dizziness and Vertigo

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Dizziness is an imprecise symptom used to describe a variety of sensations that include vertigo, light-headedness, faintness, and imbalance. When used to describe a sense of spinning or other motion, dizziness is designated as *vertigo*. Vertigo may be physiologic, occurring during or after a sustained head rotation, or it may be pathologic, due to vestibular dysfunction. The term *light-headedness* is commonly applied to presyncopal sensations due to brain hypoperfusion but also may refer to disequilibrium and imbalance. A challenge to diagnosis is that patients often have difficulty distinguishing among these various symptoms, and the words they choose do not reliably indicate the underlying etiology.

There are a number of potential causes of dizziness. Vascular disorders cause presyncopal dizziness as a result of cardiac dysrhythmia, orthostatic hypotension, medication effects, or other causes. Such presyncopal sensations vary in duration; they may increase in severity until loss of consciousness occurs, or they may resolve before loss of consciousness if the cerebral ischemia is corrected. Faintness and syncope, which are discussed in detail in [Chap. 27](#), should always be considered when one is evaluating patients with brief episodes of dizziness or dizziness that occurs with upright posture.

Vestibular causes of dizziness (vertigo or imbalance) may be due to peripheral lesions that affect the labyrinths or vestibular nerves or to involvement of the central vestibular pathways. They may be paroxysmal or due to a fixed unilateral or bilateral vestibular deficit. Acute unilateral lesions cause vertigo due to a sudden imbalance in vestibular inputs from the two labyrinths. Bilateral lesions cause imbalance and instability of vision (*oscillopsia*) when the head moves. Other causes of dizziness include nonvestibular imbalance and gait disorders (e.g., loss of proprioception from sensory neuropathy, parkinsonism) and anxiety.

When evaluating patients with dizziness, questions to consider include the following: (1) Is it dangerous (e.g., arrhythmia, transient ischemic attack/stroke)? (2) Is it vestibular? (3) If vestibular, is it peripheral or central? A careful history and examination often provide sufficient information to answer these questions and determine whether additional studies or referral to a specialist is necessary.

### APPROACH TO THE PATIENT:

#### Dizziness

##### HISTORY

When a patient presents with dizziness, the first step is to delineate more precisely the nature of the symptom. In the case of vestibular disorders, the physical symptoms depend on whether the lesion is unilateral or bilateral, and whether it is acute or chronic and progressive. Vertigo, an illusion of self or environmental motion, implies asymmetry of vestibular inputs from the two labyrinths or in their central pathways that is usually acute. Symmetric bilateral vestibular hypofunction causes imbalance but no vertigo. Because of the ambiguity in patients' descriptions of their symptoms, diagnosis based simply on symptom characteristics is typically unreliable. The history should focus closely on other features, including whether this is the first attack, the duration of this and any prior episodes, provoking factors, and accompanying symptoms.

Dizziness can be divided into episodes that last for seconds, minutes, hours, or days. Common causes of brief dizziness (seconds) include benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV) and orthostatic hypotension, both of which typically are provoked by changes in head and body position. Attacks of vestibular migraine and Ménière's disease often last hours. When episodes are of intermediate duration (minutes), transient ischemic attacks of the posterior circulation should be considered, although migraine and a number of other causes are also possible.