



Ménière's: Researching a Riddle

For many people who visit the doctor seeking a reason for physical symptoms, a diagnosis can be reassuring. Even when the diagnosis isn't happy news, knowing the underlying reason for symptoms can be a confirmation that you aren't "crazy" and there is, in fact, something wrong with your body. Unfortunately, sometimes the diagnosis offers only an ambiguous definition of the problem and, while treatment may help relieve symptoms, the underlying cause of the problem remains a riddle. Such is the case with Ménière's disease, which is actually a syndrome. While a disease can be traced to a physical mechanism for the symptoms experienced by patients, a syndrome is a loosely connected set of symptoms which may or may not have a common cause. Whether a "disease" or a "syndrome," Ménière's is idiopathic, which means the etiology (cause) of the condition that gives rise to symptoms is unknown.

The House Ear Institute has been studying Ménière's disease since the early 1970s, when Institute researchers embarked upon a 5-year project that included investigation of a previously-accepted hypothesis that Ménière's symptoms were psychosomatic in origin. Institute findings showed that there was a histopathological basis for Ménière's, which rendered the "psychosomatic" hypothesis unlikely.

Ménière's studies are ongoing, and continue to be an area of focus for translational research at the Institute. Most recently, the Institute's Clinical Studies Department has conducted three questionnaire-driven patient studies of surgical procedures and prognostics for Ménière's. Follow up studies with patients who have undergone a shunt procedure (a surgery discussed in the expert interview on page 10), show that a majority of patients report great post-surgery improvement. The shunt, first introduced by William House, M.D., continues to be a good first choice for patients seeking surgical treatment to reduce vertigo.

Information and a partial list of articles published by Institute researchers on Ménière's may be found in the Research and Clinical Studies sections of the Institute's Web site at www.hei.org or from the Institute's librarian, Liz Gnerre, at library@hei.org. Additional information about Ménière's disease may be found at the Ménière's Disease Information Center at www.menieresinfo.com.