

FREE GUIDE

The Grocery Store Survival Guide

Practical ways to get through the store when you feel floaty, off, or overwhelmed — while you retrain the systems that got you here.

By Carly Clevenger, PT, DPT — Vestibular Rehabilitation Specialist

First, know this: it's common — but it's not normal

If Target, Costco, or your local grocery store has started to feel "off" — lights too bright, aisles too long, a little floaty, leaning on the cart more than you used to — you are not imagining it, and you're not alone. This usually happens when one of your balance systems isn't working as smoothly as it should. It's not just stress, getting older, or being a busy mom.

The good news: these systems are **very trainable**. The tips below help you get through the store *today*; retraining (the part that actually fixes it) is what the exercises at the end — and the full course — are for.

Why grocery stores are the "perfect storm"



Visual overload

Long aisles, bright lights, shiny floors, hundreds of labels and patterns. Your eyes scan constantly — near, far, up, down.



Constant head movement

Turning to scan shelves, looking up high, bending to the bottom shelf. Your eyes and inner ears must coordinate through all of it.



Motion around you

Carts, people, kids. Even standing still, your brain is tracking everything moving around you.

When all three hit at once and one of your balance systems isn't keeping up, the whole experience starts to feel overwhelming. That's also why bigger stores usually feel worse — more space, more visual information, more movement.

Before you go: set your system up to succeed

- ✓ **Start smaller than you think.** A short trip to a smaller store beats a marathon Costco run. Gradual exposure is how your brain rebuilds confidence — you can work back up to the big stores.
- ✓ **Go at a quieter time.** Less motion around you means one less thing for your brain to track. Early mornings and weekday mid-mornings are usually calmest.
- ✓ **Write your list in aisle order.** The less scanning and searching your eyes have to do, the less visual load. Know what you need and roughly where it is.
- ✓ **Hydrate, and watch the caffeine.** Your brain and inner ear are sensitive to fluid balance, and higher amounts of caffeine can turn symptoms up for some people.
- ✓ **Don't go in depleted.** Poor sleep and high stress make the whole system more sensitive. If today is a rough day, a shorter trip — or grocery pickup — is a strategy, not a failure.
- ✓ **Give yourself more time than you need.** Rushing adds stress on top of sensory load. A calm pace lets symptoms settle between aisles.

In the store: the settle-first strategy

1 If symptoms start building, pause — don't push.

Stop walking, slow your breathing, and let your eyes rest on one stable, non-moving thing (the end of an aisle, a sign, the floor ahead of you). Most of the time things calm down within a minute or two. This is not a "no pain, no gain" situation — powering through strong symptoms actually slows progress.

2 Use the cart — on purpose.

Leaning on the cart gives your body sensors extra information and steadies you. If you've noticed yourself doing it, that's not weakness — it's useful data about which systems are working hard.

3 Move your head slowly and deliberately.

Quick head turns are one of the biggest triggers in stores. Turn your whole body toward the shelf when you can, and give your eyes a beat to land on what you're looking for before moving again.

4 Aim for "medium," and keep score honestly.

A little challenge is where your brain learns; intense symptoms that take a long time to settle mean today's dose was too much. Staying one aisle longer than last time, or recovering faster afterward, is real progress — celebrate it.

5 Have an exit plan — without shame.

Knowing you *can* step outside, sit on a bench, or hand the list to someone takes the fear out of the trip. Fear itself adds stress to a system that's already working hard.

3 gentle exercises to start retraining (from your couch)

These are simplified starting versions of the foundation exercises in the full program. Do them **seated**, once per day. A small, mild symptom response (slight floatiness, eye strain, feeling a little "off") is expected and okay — stop, let it settle for a minute, then continue. Strong symptoms that linger mean do fewer reps next time.

1. Eye jumps (saccades)

Sit tall. Hold your thumbs up at eye level, about shoulder-width apart. Keeping your head completely still, jump your eyes quickly from one thumb to the other, letting them fully land and focus on each before switching. Start with about 10 back-and-forth reps; build gradually toward 30 as tolerated.

Why: this is the skill your eyes use scanning shelves and reading labels.

2. Smooth tracking (pursuits)

Sit tall and hold one thumb out at eye level. Keeping your head still, move your thumb slowly left and right and follow it with just your eyes — smooth and controlled, no jumping. Start with about 10 slow passes.

Why: this is how your eyes track carts, people, and your kids in motion.

3. Steady gaze with head turns (VOR)

Sit tall and hold one thumb out at eye level. Keep your eyes locked on your thumbnail while you turn your head side to side at a comfortable speed — the target should stay clear, not blurry. Start with about 10 turns each way.

Why: this eye-inner-ear teamwork is what keeps the world steady while you look around the store.



A quick safety note

If your main symptom is **true spinning vertigo** with movements like rolling over in bed, lying down, or sitting up, that may be BPPV — which is treated differently (and very successfully).

And if you experience frequent fainting, new weakness, trouble speaking, sudden hearing loss, or a sudden severe headache unlike anything before, please have those evaluated by a medical provider first.

This guide helps you cope. The course helps you fix it.

The Grocery Store “Feeling Off” Reset — Carly's step-by-step program for retraining the systems behind grocery-store dizziness. Waitlist members get founding-member pricing when doors open.

Join the waitlist: dizzy-freept.com/course

Important Notice

This guide is for educational purposes only and is not medical advice. It is not intended to diagnose or treat any specific condition. Although this guide was created by Carly Clevenger, PT, DPT, a licensed physical therapist in Indiana, reading it does not establish a patient-provider relationship. The exercises and information provided are general examples and may not be appropriate for everyone. Please move at a level that feels appropriate for you. If you experience new, severe, or worsening symptoms, stop and consult a qualified healthcare provider.

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