

MODIFICATION OF THE PASSIVE VESTIBULO-OCULAR REFLEX DURING AND AFTER SHORT-DURATION SPACEFLIGHT

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The vestibulo-ocular reflex (VOR) is mediated by integration of canal and otolith inputs to generate compensatory eye movements during head movements. We hypothesized that adaptive change in vestibular processing of gravito-inertial cues would be reflected by plane specific modification of the VOR during passive whole-body rotation during and after spaceflight. Using a repeated measures design, the VOR was assessed in four payload crewmembers in yaw, pitch and roll planes during multiple sessions before, during and after an 8 day orbital mission (STS-42). Rotation was about an earth-vertical axis during ground tests, with the head located off-axis by up to 45cm during pitch and roll rotation (peak acceleration <0.2g). The motion profiles included sum-of-sinusoids between 0.02 - 1.39 Hz (yaw), single sinusoids between 0.05 - 1.25 Hz (yaw and pitch) and velocity steps (yaw, pitch and roll). Eye movements were recorded with both video and electro-oculographic techniques. As expected, VOR gain changes were greater in pitch than in yaw. During pitch rotation, there was a progressive shift in the axis of eye movements during the flight, which was also present during the early post-flight period. This increased horizontal component during pitch, most prevalent at 0.2 Hz, was interpreted as an increase in a translational vergence response elicited during eccentric rotation as subjects imagined a wall fixed target. There was also an increased horizontal component during the eccentric roll step runs performed on flight day 7. These results are consistent with a frequency-dependent increase in otolith-mediated translational VOR responses following adaptation to microgravity. We conclude that the adaptive changes in the VOR are likely to be greatest in the frequency range where there is a cross-over of otolith-mediated tilt and translation responses.

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