

Migraine Headaches

Ways to deal with the pain

What causes migraine headaches?

Migraine headaches seem to be caused in part by changes in the level of a chemical, *serotonin*, in the body and in part by changes in blood vessels in the brain.

Serotonin plays many roles in the body, including effects on mood and effects on blood vessels. When serotonin levels are high, blood vessels *constrict*, or shrink. When serotonin levels fall, the blood vessels *dilate*, or swell. In people with migraines, this swelling seems to cause pain or other problems in the nearby nerves.

Many things can affect the level of serotonin in your body, including your level of blood sugar, changes in your estrogen levels if you're a woman and certain foods.

What does a migraine feel like?

The pain of a migraine headache can be intense. It can get in the way of your daily activities. Migraines aren't the same in all people. Possible symptoms of migraines are listed in the box on page 2.

Are there different kinds of migraine headaches?

Yes. The two most common are *classic migraine* and *common migraine*.

Classic migraines start with a set of warning signs. These warning signs are called the *aura*.

The aura often involves changes in the way you see. You may see flashing lights and colors or zigzags of light. You may temporarily lose some of your vision, such as your side vision, in one or both eyes. Things may also seem like they are different sizes or shapes or are in different locations.

You may also feel a strange prickly or burning sensation, or have muscle weakness on one side of your body. These sensations may seem to march through your body. You may have trouble communicating. The aura may also include feelings of depression, irritability and restlessness.

Auras last about 15 to 30 minutes. Head pain usually follows the aura, though sometimes the two overlap or the head pain never occurs. The head pain of classic migraines may occur on one or both sides of your head.

Common migraines don't start with an aura. Two hours to three days before the pain begins, you may feel tired, crave certain foods, yawn more than usual, feel depressed, have a surge of energy, feel irritable, anxious or restless, or be more talkative than usual.

Common migraines may start more slowly than classic migraines, last longer and interfere more with daily activities. The pain of common migraines may be on only one side of your head. If you have severe headaches that don't seem to be caused by muscle tension and don't have an aura, they may be common migraines.

Symptoms of migraines

- Intense throbbing or dull aching pain on one or both sides of your head
- Nausea or vomiting
- Changes in how you see, including blurred vision or blind spots in your vision
- Being bothered by light, noise and odors
- Feeling tired
- Confusion
- Stopped-up nose
- Feeling cold or sweaty
- Stiff or tender neck
- Feeling annoyed
- Lightheadedness
- Tender scalp
- Cold hands and feet

What are the other types of migraine headache?

There are many other, less common types of migraine. For example, one type of migraine has an aura that isn't followed by head pain, one type lasts longer than three days, another type has one or more aura symptoms that last longer than three weeks, and one type of classic migraine causes temporary paralysis of one side of the body or of the eyes.

How long do migraines usually last?

Migraines may last from four to 24 hours. They may happen once or twice a year or as often as daily. Migraines tend to get less severe after middle age.

Foods that may trigger migraines

Aged, canned, cured or processed meat, including bologna, game, ham, herring, hot dogs, pepperoni and sausage	Lentils
Alcoholic beverages, especially red wine	Meat tenderizer
Aspartame	Mincemeat pie
Avocados	Monosodium glutamate (MSG)
Beans, including pole, broad, lima, Italian, navy, pinto and garbanzo beans	Nuts and peanut butter
Brewer's yeast, including fresh yeast coffee cake, donuts and sourdough bread	Onions, except small amounts for flavoring
Caffeine in excess	Papaya
Canned soup or bouillon cubes	Passion fruit
Carob	Pea pods
Cheese	Pickled, preserved or marinated foods, such as olives and pickles, and some snack foods
Chocolate and cocoa	Raisins
Cultured dairy products, such as buttermilk and sour cream	Red plums
Figs	Sauerkraut
	Seasoned salt
	Snow peas
	Soy sauce

What things may set off a migraine?

Certain things can set off migraines in some people. Foods that contain tyramine, sodium nitrite or phenylalanine (see the list above) can lead to migraines.

Other things that may also contribute to migraines include the following:

- Strong odors, bright lights or loud noises
- Weather changes or altitude changes
- Being tired, stressed or depressed
- Repressing anger or feeling let-down after an intense or stressful event
- Changes in sleeping patterns or sleeping time, especially sleeping late or sleeping longer than usual
- Missing meals or fasting
- Menstrual periods for some women
- Birth control pills or hormones for some women

What medicines may help?

Some migraine treatments are used to try to stop the headache as it's beginning. Most of these treatments should be started as soon as you think you're getting a migraine.

Medicines that can be used include aspirin, acetaminophen (Datril, Panadol, Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil, Medipren, Motrin, Nuprin), naproxen (Aleve), ketoprofen (Orudis), diflunisal (Dolobid), ketorolac (Toradol) and others.

A medicine called ergotamine can be effective alone (Ergomar) or combined with other drugs. Ergotamine combined with caffeine (Cafergot, Wigraine) can be taken by mouth or as a suppository. Ergotamine also can be taken under the tongue (Ergostat). Dihydroergotamine (D.H.E. 45), which is given as a shot, is related to ergotamine.

Ergotamine must be used carefully. Using it every day can cause tolerance so that when a dose is missed, symptoms start. This is why a four-day period off the medicine is advised between days of use.

A new drug for migraine is sumatriptan (Imitrex). It seems to help head pain and other migraine symptoms, such as nausea and being bothered by light. It's given as a shot or as a pill.

A narcotic type of medicine may be needed if the pain won't go away. Narcotics can be addictive, so they must be used carefully. One is now available as a nasal spray (Stadol).

Your doctor may also suggest taking medicines that can help you feel less nauseated.

Many combinations of medicine are available and are often used when a single-medicine approach isn't effective. Your doctor may try different combinations of medicines. Often, more than one combination will need to be tried to find one that works for you.

Tips on reducing the pain of an attack

- Lying in a dark, quiet room
- Putting a cold compress or rag over your forehead
- A massage of your scalp using a lot of pressure
- Putting pressure on your temples; tying a band around your head

Can anything be done to prevent attacks?

Another approach to migraine treatment is to prevent attacks with daily medicine. Your doctor may suggest this approach if your headaches happen more than twice a month or if your headaches make it hard for you to work and function. There are many different medicines available. Talk with your family doctor if you think you might need daily medicine.

Other tips for preventing migraines include avoiding foods or other things that seem to cause migraines for you. Getting plenty of restful sleep is a good idea. Trying to relax and lower your stress may also reduce the number of migraines you have. Biofeedback may help you relax—ask your doctor about it.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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