

Medical Urgent Care
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McKesson Clinical Reference Products: Women's Health Advisor 9.0

Migraine Headache

What is a migraine headache?

A migraine headache is a special kind of headache that can last for several days and cause intense pain. Migraines may be accompanied or preceded by other symptoms, such as nausea and visual disturbances. A common variation of migraine is the "tension/vascular" or "mixed" headache where muscle tension related head pain is combined with the "sick" or nauseating sensation of migraine. Some people start having migraine headaches as children. Others may not have them until later in life. The headaches may recur from time to time throughout life. The condition tends to run in families. It affects women three times more often than men.

How does it occur?

Migraine is caused in part by activation of certain pain receptors and changes in blood flow in and around the brain. An imbalance of brain chemicals (neurotransmitters) also feeds into the cause of migraine. New research suggests that trigeminal nerve fibers that are present in the dura (or covering envelope) around the brain are stimulated when a migraine hits.

Certain events or substances can trigger migraine. They include:

- stress
- fatigue
- changes in the weather
- certain foods or beverages
- bright lights
- loud noises
- strong smells.

What are the symptoms?

Before a migraine starts, there is often a warning period when you don't feel well. Some people lose part of their vision or see bright spots or zigzag patterns in front of their eyes. These symptoms, which may precede and predict a migraine headache, are called migraine aura. The vision changes of the aura usually go away as the headache begins.

Migraine symptoms may include:

- throbbing or pounding headache
- extreme sensitivity to light
- blurred vision
- nausea and vomiting
- numbness or tingling of the face or one arm.

The pain is usually more severe on one side of the head but can affect the whole head.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and give you a physical exam.

A careful history of your headaches is very helpful. Your doctor may ask you to keep a headache diary in which you record the following:

- date and time of each attack
- how long the headache lasts
- type of pain (for example, dull, sharp, throbbing, or a feeling of pressure)
- location of pain
- any symptoms before the headache began
- foods and drinks you had before the headache began
- use of cigarettes, caffeine, alcohol or carbonated drinks before the headache began
- time you went to bed and time you got up before the headache began
- menstrual periods and use of birth control pills or other female hormones.

Depending on your headache symptoms, your health care provider may recommend tests to check for other, more serious causes of your symptoms. For example, you may need a Head CT Scan or Brain Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI).

How is it treated?

Prevention is an important part of treatment. For example:

- You may need to change to a healthier diet.
- Relaxation exercises and biofeedback may help you manage stress.
- Your headache diary may suggest certain foods or activities you should avoid.
- Your healthcare provider may prescribe medications to prevent the severe and frequent headaches.
- Your health care provider may prescribe other medications aimed at keeping a migraine from progressing to a severe episode. This means you need to recognize the warning symptoms and take the medications as directed as soon as a migraine begins. Medications used for this purpose act by: Regulating blood flow to brain pain receptors, allowing for relaxation.
- Altering other specific chemical receptors in the brain. This type of medication is taken.
- Altering the blood vessels.

Some of these medications are available as injection, nasal spray or as a tablet. Please consult your physician for more information.

How long will the effects last?

Symptoms last from a few hours to a few days. You may have migraines the rest of your life. However, attacks usually occur less often as you grow older.

How can I take care of myself?

When a migraine begins:

- As soon as possible after the headache symptoms begin, take a pain reliever or a medication prescribed by your health care provider.
- Rest in a quiet, dark room until the symptoms are gone.

Call your health care provider immediately if you have unusual symptoms such as:

- fever
- stiff neck
- nervous system symptoms such as difficulty speaking, arm or leg weakness, or paralysis.

You may do the following to help prevent migraines:

- Eat regular meals.
- Avoid foods from the following list if eating them seems to cause your headaches:
 - wine, ale, and beer
 - chocolate milk and buttermilk
 - aged and processed cheeses
 - aged, canned, cured, and processed meats
 - breads made with yeast and yeast extracts
 - foods containing cheese, chocolate, or nuts
- Ask your health care provider about avoiding medications that may trigger headaches.
- Ask your health care provider about discontinuing birth control or hormone pills if you have been taking them.
- Avoid smoking.
- Avoid drinking a lot of alcohol.
- Maintain your recommended weight.
- Get regular rest.
- Try to balance work, relaxation, recreation, and rest in your life.
- Try to identify and avoid stress.

Don't drive a car during a migraine.

If your symptoms get worse, or if they don't get better when you take medication, make another appointment with your health care provider. It may take several visits to find the best way to control your headaches.

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