

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.



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?

For years migraine headaches were thought to be caused when blood vessels in the head contract and then swell, producing pain. Recent research suggests that certain substances or events trigger an imbalance of brain chemicals (neurotransmitters).



Common migraine triggers include:

- stress
- fatigue
- changes in the weather
- certain foods
- 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.
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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 have a brain scan or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).



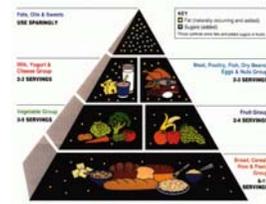
How is it treated?

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.



You may need to take medication regularly to prevent the severe and frequent headaches. Drugs your health care provider might prescribe include propranolol, verapamil, antidepressants, and ergot preparations such as ergotamine, ergonovine, or methysergide. You may need to try a medicine for several weeks to see if it works.

Your health care provider may prescribe other medications aimed at keeping migraines from becoming severe. It's best to take the medication as soon as possible after a headache begins. This means you need to recognize the warning symptoms. Medications used for this purpose are:

Midrin, an oral tablet containing isometheptene, dichloralphenazone, and acetaminophen

a new group of drugs (the "triptans"), of which Imitrex (sumatriptan) was the first, which are available as tablets (including some that may be taken without water), an injection, and a nasal spray

D.H.E. (dihydroergotamine), which is an injection available at your health care provider's office.

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 such as aspirin, acetaminophen, ibuprofen, 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.

For more information, call or write:

American Council for Headache Education (ACHE)

19 Mantua

Mt. Royal, NJ 08061

800-255-ACHE (255-2243)

856-423-0258

Web site: <http://www.achenet.org>

Educational materials, referrals to support groups

National Headache Foundation

428 West St. James Place, 2nd Floor

Chicago, IL 60657

800-843-2256

Web site: <http://www.headaches.org>

Educational materials, list of headache specialists, information specialists

Developed by McKesson Clinical Reference Systems.

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