

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 called serotonin in the body. Serotonin plays many roles in the body, including effects on blood vessels. When serotonin levels are high, blood vessels constrict (shrink). When serotonin levels fall, the blood vessels dilate (swell). In people with migraines, this swelling causes pain or other problems.

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

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 to the right.

Are there different kinds of migraine headaches?

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

Classic migraines start with warning signs, called an aura. The aura often involves changes in the way you see. You may see flashing lights and colors. You may temporarily lose some of your vision, such as your side vision.

You may also feel a strange prickly or burning sensation, or have muscle weakness on one side of your body. You may have trouble communicating. You may also feel depressed, irritable and restless.

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

Some 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
- Being bothered by light, noise or odors
- Feeling tired and/or confused
- Stopped-up nose
- Feeling cold or sweaty
- Stiff or tender neck
- Light-headedness
- Tender scalp



Common migraines don't start with an aura. 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.

How long do migraines usually last?

Migraines may last from 4 to 72 hours. They may happen once or twice a year or as often as daily.

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 to the right) can lead to migraines.

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

- Strong odors, bright lights or loud noises
- Weather or altitude changes
- Being tired, stressed or depressed or the let-down after a stressful event
- Changes in sleeping patterns or sleeping time
- Missing meals or fasting
- Menstrual periods, birth control pills or hormones

How are migraines treated?

There are 2 types of migraine treatments. Some treatments are used to relieve the headache pain. Most of these treatments should be started as soon as you think you're getting a migraine. The other group of treatments are used to prevent headaches before they occur.

Foods that may trigger migraines

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

Can nonprescription medicines help relieve the pain?

Yes. Nonprescription medicines can help migraine pain. They include aspirin, acetaminophen (brand name: Tylenol); an acetaminophen, aspirin and caffeine combination (brand name: Excedrin Migraine); ibuprofen (brand names: Advil,

Motrin, Nuprin, etc.); naproxen (brand name: Aleve), and ketoprofen (brand name: Orudis KT).

What about prescription medicines?

People with more severe pain may need prescription medicine. A medicine called ergotamine (brand name: Ergostat) can be effective alone or combined with other medicines (brand names: Cafegot, Ercaf, Wigraine). Dihydroergotamine (DHE 45) is related to ergotamine and can be helpful.

Some newer prescription medicines include sumatriptan (brand name: Imitrex), zolmitriptan (brand name: Zomig), naratriptan (brand name: Amerge) and rizatriptan (brand name: Maxalt).

Many combinations of medicines (one brand name: Midrin) are available for use when a single medicine isn't effective.

If the pain won't go away, stronger medicine may be needed, such as a narcotic (brand name: Stadol nasal spray) or medicines that contain a barbiturate (brand names: Fiorinal, Fioricet). These medicines can be habit-forming and should be used cautiously.

Can medicine help prevent migraines?

Yes. Medicine to prevent migraines may be helpful if your headaches happen more than twice a month or if your headaches make it hard for you to work and function. Examples of medicines used to prevent migraines include propranolol (brand name: Inderal), antidepressants such as amitriptyline (brand name: Elavil) and fluoxetine (brand name: Prozac), and divalproex (brand name: Depakote).

What else can I do to prevent migraines?

Try to avoid foods or other things that seem to cause migraines for you. Get plenty of sleep. Try to relax and reduce the stress in your life.

Tips on reducing the pain

- Lie down in a dark, quiet room
- Put a cold compress or rag over your forehead
- Massage your scalp using a lot of pressure
- Put pressure on your temples

Additional comments from your family doctor



The American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation has favorably reviewed this material. Favorable review means that medical information is accurate, but does not imply endorsement of any conclusions presented.

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.

The American Academy of Family Physicians provides health information on the World Wide Web at familydoctor.org.

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127