Migraine headaches

Migraine headaches afflict two to seven percent of all headache sufferers and can cause pain extreme enough to prevent a person from functioning normally. Migraines often occur on one side of the head and are of a throbbing nature. They are sometimes accompanied by visual changes that occur just prior to or during the headache's onset.

Most migraine sufferers are between 25 and 55 years of age; migraines also affect more women than men. Some people experience fewer episodes as they grow older and may even enjoy a complete remission after age 50. The precise cause of migraines is unknown. Evidence suggests, however, that a complex mechanism involving abnormally excitable brain nerve cells, combined with blood vessels inflamed by rapidly changing blood flow, may be involved. Heredity may also play a role, as more than half of all migraine sufferers have close family members who are similarly affected.

Note your symptoms

Migraine without aura

About 90 percent of migraine headaches do not involve an aura. Generally the person has several attacks a year (lasting one to three days each), with throbbing pain most frequently occurring on one side of the head.

This variety of migraine can be preceded by fatigue or depression, or at the opposite extreme, feelings of exhilaration. Pain can be accompanied by sensitivity to light, noise and movement. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting and blurred vision. Women often get this type of migraine just before their menstrual period, suggesting that hormone levels are involved.

Migraine with aura

This type of migraine is known for its often dramatic effect on visual, sensory and motor functions. Sufferers may experience a variety of visual effects, such as blind spots, double vision, sparks, stars, flashes of light or pulsating fields of color. Numbness and tingling in the arms and hands also may occur. These symptoms usually last no longer than 30 minutes.
Headache triggers

Factors that can trigger the onset of a migraine or other types of headaches include:

- Glare from harsh light
- Stress (which can increase the severity and frequency of headaches)
- Hunger
- Climate change
- Certain food and beverages
- Oral contraceptives and medications that dilate blood vessels
- Menstrual cycle
- Physical or mental exhaustion
- Too much or too little sleep

Cluster headache

Cluster headaches have many similarities to migraines, but there are some unique differences, as well. Cluster headaches affect men more often than women and are not necessarily inherited. Throbbing, burning pain behind or above one eye (like a migraine) becomes intense rapidly and lasts from 10 minutes to several hours. One to three attacks can occur in a 24-hour period and nasal stuffiness may accompany the headache. Nausea and vomiting, which are common with migraines, are rare in association with cluster headaches, however. These headaches respond well to drugs such as corticosteroids, which can constrict the blood vessels. They do not respond to self-care; a health care provider should be consulted for treatment.

What you can do

The key to avoiding migraines is to identify your particular triggers and find ways to manage or eliminate them. Counseling or psychotherapy can be a very effective means of identifying these factors. When you feel a migraine coming on, the pain may be relieved or controlled by the following:

- Lying down in a cool, dark, quiet room
- Putting an ice bag (wrapped in a towel) or a cool cloth on your head
- Performing yoga, meditation or muscle-relaxation exercises
- Taking an over-the-counter (OTC) painkiller such as aspirin, acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) may help relieve discomfort. The OTC medication Excedrin Migraine (a combination of acetaminophen, aspirin and caffeine) is approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for relieving moderate to severe migraine pain.

Cautions for OTC medications

While a number of OTC medications are helpful in relieving the pain associated with migraines and other types of headaches, the following caveats (warnings) are important to keep in mind.
• NEVER give aspirin to children/teenagers, unless directed to do so by your healthcare provider. It can cause Reye’s syndrome, a rare but often fatal condition.

• Note: NSAIDS such as ibuprofen or naproxen can cause stomach, heart or blood vessel problems so don’t take them for long periods of time without consulting a doctor.

• Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before taking over-the-counter (OTC) medications (including, vitamins and herbal supplements) if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, have a chronic condition or take any other medication.

Many people find that keeping a diary with information on symptoms, possible triggers and which self-care techniques seem to work is a helpful tool for developing treatment strategies and sometimes even preventing headache onset.

What your doctor may do

A doctor’s visit will typically involve a physical examination, simple nerve-function tests, and questions about the nature, severity, frequency and length of your headaches, as well as issues such as how you cope with stress. This is when a headache diary becomes especially helpful. If your doctor suspects a neurologic cause, he or she may order a test to visualize the brain, such as *computed tomography* (CT) or *magnetic resonance imaging* (MRI). Many people worry that their headaches are due to a potentially serious condition. However, this is rarely the case. Migraines alone are not associated with the development of other illnesses or neurologic diseases.

Many medications are available to either prevent migraines or control the pain. sumatriptan is a very effective drug, which can be self-administered orally or by injection at the onset of symptoms. Other drugs, such as ergot derivatives, may also provide some relief if they are taken within two hours of the start of your symptoms. Preventive drugs, such as some medications that are also used to treat blood pressure and depression, may be prescribed for frequent headaches.

Final note

Migraines can make life miserable. However, even if you can't completely eliminate them, the right combination of self-care techniques and appropriate medication can make a significant difference in your ability to manage this painful condition.

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