
Headache – migraine

Summary

- Migraine is a type of headache and a recognised medical condition.
 - Young women are most at risk.
 - There is no cure for migraine, but the right treatment can reduce the number of attacks.
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Migraines can be experienced from as little as once or twice a year, or as often as two or three times a week. The pain is severe, throbbing and usually on one side of the head. A migraine attack can last from four hours to three days and is associated with a spasm of the blood vessels leading to the brain. Three times as many women (15 per cent) as men (5 per cent) suffer from migraine, and scientists believe that hormones play a large role.

Symptoms of migraine

A migraine headache has different symptoms from other types of headache. Migraine symptoms can include:

- nausea and vomiting
- sensitivity to light
- sensitivity to sound
- affected vision, such as an aura
- sensitivity to smell and touch
- numbness of the face or extremities (hands and feet).

Triggers for migraine

No one really knows what causes migraine, but it may be an inherited condition. Attacks are almost certainly triggered by a combination of factors, such as:

- diet – cheese, chocolate, citrus fruits, alcohol (especially red wine)
- sleep – too little or too much
- menstrual cycle
- physiochemical – excessive heat, light, noise or certain chemicals
- emotional causes – stress, excitement or fatigue
- relaxation (weekend migraines) – often triggered by a period of stress and overwork followed by relaxation.

Hormones and migraine

Migraines affect more women than men, and some researchers believe that sex hormones play a key role. For around half of these women, migraine occurs in the few days prior to or following their menstrual period. Some studies suggest that reduced levels of the sex hormone oestrogen around the time of menstruation may be to blame.

Treatment of migraine

There is no cure for migraine and prevention is difficult, but treatments can help reduce the number of attacks. Migraines vary greatly from person to person and so does the treatment.

The four treatment options available to migraine sufferers include:

- avoiding the trigger factors – this can be difficult, since migraines are often triggered by a combination of factors
- medication – including pain-relieving medication and medication to alter pressure on blood vessels
- preventative treatment – medication taken on a daily basis to reduce the number of attacks
- non-medication therapies – including acupuncture, biofeedback, goggles, hypnotherapy, exclusion diets, relaxation, yoga, meditation, herbal or homeopathic remedies.

In the past, pethidine was used to treat migraine. However, this is a highly addictive medication and far more effective treatments are now available. Talk to your doctor or a neurologist about the best treatment for your migraines.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Neurologist
- Headache Australia Tel 1300 886 660

Things to remember

- Migraine is a type of headache and a recognised medical condition.
- Young women are most at risk.
- There is no cure for migraine, but the right treatment can reduce the number of attacks.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Brain Foundation Victoria

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