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PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUTS

Migraine Headaches

Topic Overview

What are migraine headaches?

[Migraines](#) are painful, throbbing headaches that last from 4 to 72 hours. When you have a migraine, it may be so painful that you are not able to follow your normal routine or do your usual activities. But even though they make you feel bad, migraines do not cause long-term damage.

Migraines are a disease. You cannot just "will them away." Talk to your doctor about your migraines. There are treatments that can help you manage them.

What causes migraines?

Experts are not sure what causes migraines. It may have something to do with the blood vessels in your brain.

Migraines run in families, but it is not clear why some people get migraines and others do not.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom of a migraine is a throbbing headache on one side of your head. You may also feel sick to your stomach and vomit. Activity, light, noise, or odors may make the migraine worse. The pain may move from one side of your head to the other, or you may feel it on both sides at the same time. Different people have different symptoms.

Some people have an [aura](#) before the migraine begins. When you have an aura, you may first see spots, wavy lines, or flashing lights. Your hands, arms, or face may tingle or feel numb. The aura usually starts about 30 minutes before the headache. But most people do not have auras.

How are migraines diagnosed?

A doctor can usually tell if you have a migraine by asking about your symptoms and examining you. You probably will not need lab tests, but your doctor may order some if he or she thinks your symptoms are caused by another disease.

Many experts think you have migraines if:¹

- You have 5 or more headache attacks without an aura or you have 2 attacks with an aura.
- Your headache lasts from 4 to 72 hours without treatment.

- You also feel sick to your stomach and may vomit. Light and noise may make your headache worse.

How are they treated?

You can usually manage your migraines. First try an [over-the-counter](#) pain medicine, such as ibuprofen or naproxen. Brand names include Advil, Motrin, and Aleve.

If over-the-counter medicine does not work, your doctor can prescribe stronger medicine that stops the migraine as it is starting. You may not be able to use some medicines if you are pregnant or have other health problems, such as heart problems or [high blood pressure](#).

When you feel a migraine coming on:

- Stop what you are doing, and take your medicine. Do not wait for the migraine to get worse. Take your medicine exactly as your doctor told you to.
- Take it easy. Rest in a quiet, dark room. Close your eyes, and try to relax or go to sleep. Do not watch TV or read. Put a cold pack or cool cloth on the painful area.

If the first treatment you try does not work, try something else. It may take time to find what works best for you.

Some people also use [other kinds](#) of treatments, such as [acupuncture](#). These may help reduce the pain or the number of migraines you have. But experts need more research to see if they really work.²

Be careful when you use your migraine medicines. Taking them too often can cause you to get another headache when you stop taking the medicine. This is called a [rebound headache](#). If you find you are taking your medicines very often, talk to your doctor before a problem starts.

Can I reduce how often I have migraines?

You may be able to reduce how often you have migraines by staying away from things that cause them. These are called "triggers." Common triggers include chocolate, red wine, cheese, MSG, strong odors, not eating, and poor sleep habits. It may be helpful for you to track and write down your triggers. You may be able to avoid the trigger and more migraines.

If you have migraines often, your doctor may prescribe medicine that helps prevent them.

Frequently Asked Questions

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