



Migraine Headache

WHAT IS A MIGRAINE HEADACHE?

More than 28 million Americans — three times more women than men — suffer from migraine headaches, a type of headache that's often severe. A migraine headache is a severe pain felt on one, and sometimes, both sides of the head. The pain is mostly in the front around the temples or behind one eye or ear. Besides pain, you may have nausea and vomiting, and be very sensitive to light and sound. Migraine can occur any time of the day, though it often starts in the morning. The pain can last a few hours or up to one or two days.

The cause of migraine headaches is unclear, but there are commonalities in people who have them.

- **Most often, migraine affects people between the ages of 15 and 55.**
- **Many people have a family history of migraine.**
- **They are more common in women.**
- **Migraine often becomes less severe and frequent with age.**

WHAT CAUSES MIGRAINE?

Although much about headaches still isn't understood, some researchers think migraines may be caused by functional changes in the trigeminal nerve system, a major pain pathway in your nervous system, and by imbalances in brain chemicals, including serotonin, which regulates pain messages going through this pathway.

During a headache, serotonin levels drop. Researchers believe this causes the trigeminal nerve to release substances called neuropeptides, which travel to your brain's outer covering. There they cause blood vessels to become dilated and inflamed. The result is headache pain.

Because levels of magnesium, a mineral involved in nerve cell function, also drop right before or during a migraine headache, it's possible that low amounts of magnesium may cause nerve cells in the brain to misfire.

Migraine headache triggers

Whatever the exact mechanism of headaches, a number of things may trigger them. Common migraine headache triggers include:

- **Hormonal changes.** Although the exact relationship between hormones and headaches isn't clear, fluctuations in estrogen and progesterone seem to trigger headaches in many women with migraine headaches. Women with a history of migraines often have reported headaches immediately before or during their periods. Others report more migraines during pregnancy or menopause. Hormonal medications, such

as contraceptives and hormone replacement therapy, also may worsen migraines.

- **Foods.** Certain foods appear to trigger headaches in some people. Common offenders include alcohol, especially beer and red wine; aged cheeses; chocolate; fermented, pickled or marinated foods; aspartame; caffeine; monosodium glutamate — a key ingredient in some Asian foods; certain seasonings; and many canned and processed foods. Skipping meals or fasting also can trigger migraines.
- **Stress.** A period of hard work followed by relaxation may lead to a weekend migraine headache. Stress at work, home, or school also can instigate migraines.
- **Sensory stimulus.** Bright lights and sun glare can produce head pain. So can unusual smells — including pleasant scents, such as perfume and flowers, and unpleasant odors, such as paint thinner and secondhand smoke.
- **Physical factors.** Intense physical exertion, including sexual activity, may provoke migraines. Changes in sleep patterns — including too much or too little sleep — also can initiate a migraine headache.
- **Changes in the environment.** A change of weather, season, altitude level, barometric pressure or time zone can prompt a migraine headache.
- **Medications.** Certain medications can aggravate migraines

ARE THERE DIFFERENT KINDS OF MIGRAINE?

Yes, there are many forms of migraine headache. But, the two forms seen most often are classic and common migraine.

Classic migraine: With a classic migraine, a person has these visual symptoms (also called an "aura") 10 to 30 minutes before an attack:

- **sees flashing lights or zigzag lines**
- **has blind spots or loses vision for a short time**

The aura can include seeing or hearing strange things. It can even disturb the senses of smell, taste, or touch. Women have this form of migraine less often than men.

Common migraine: With a common migraine, a person does not have an aura, but does have the other migraine symptoms, such as nausea and vomiting.



WHEN SHOULD YOU SEEK HELP FOR HEADACHES?

Nearly half of the people in the United States who have migraine do not get diagnosed and treated. The National Headache Foundation (<http://www.headaches.org>) suggests talking to the doctor about headaches if:

- **you have several headaches per month and each lasts for several hours or days**
- **your headaches disrupt your home, work, or school life**
- **you have nausea, vomiting, vision, or other sensory problems**

WHAT TESTS ARE USED TO DETERMINE IF ONE HAS A MIGRAINE?

If you think you get migraine headaches, talk with your doctor. Before the appointment, write down:

1. **Frequency of headaches**
2. **Pain location**
3. **Length of headaches**
4. **When the headaches happen, such as during your menstrual cycle**
5. **Other symptoms, such as nausea or blind spots**
6. **Any family history of migraine**

The doctor may also do an exam and ask more questions about health history. This could include past head injury, sinus or dental problems, or medicine use. By just talking with the doctor, enough information may be obtained to diagnose migraine.

Vision tests, a computerized tomography (CT) head scan or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) — a diagnostic imaging procedure that combines a strong magnetic field, radio waves and computer technology to produce clear images of your internal organs, including your brain may be used in the screening.

CAN STRESS REALLY CAUSE MIGRAINES?

Stress is the most common trigger of headache. Studies have found that it is the day-to-day stresses, not these major life changes, that are most linked to headaches. Learning to make time for you and finding healthy ways to deal with stress are important. Some things you can do to help prevent or reduce stress include:

- **eating a healthy diet**
- **being active (at least 30 minutes most days of the week is best)**
- **doing relaxation exercises**
- **getting enough sleep**

It may be helpful to pinpoint which factors in life cause stress. Avoid some of these stresses. For other stresses that can't be controlled, try to think of ways ahead of time to help cope with them.

HOW ARE MIGRAINES TREATED?

Even though migraine has no cure, work with the doctor to develop a treatment plan that meets the patient's needs. The plan should include ways to treat the headache symptoms when they happen, as well as ways to help make the headaches less frequent or severe. It may include all or some of these methods.

Lifestyle changes: Finding and avoiding things that cause headache is one way to reduce how often attacks happen and how painful they are. Diet, the amount of stress in life, and other lifestyle habits may add to getting migraines. Eating a healthy diet, avoiding smoking, and reducing alcohol intake may help improve your headaches. Learn stress reduction techniques and find other positive ways to cope with stress. Try to get on a regular sleep pattern.

Medicine: There are two ways to approach the treatment of migraine headache with drugs: prevent the attacks, or relieve the symptoms during the attacks. Many people with migraine use both forms of treatment. Some medicines used to help prevent attacks include drugs that were designed to treat epilepsy and depression. To relieve symptoms during attacks, your doctor may start by telling you to take over-the-counter drugs such as aspirin, acetaminophen, or NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) like ibuprofen. If these drugs don't work to give relief, the doctor can prescribe types of drugs called ergotamines or triptans. Ergotamines narrow the blood vessels, which helps the migraine's throbbing pain. Triptans are new types of drugs that relieve pain by both narrowing blood vessels and balancing the chemicals in the brain. Hormone therapy may help some women whose migraines seem to be linked to their menstrual cycle.

Alternative methods: Biofeedback has been shown to help some people with migraine. It involves learning to control how your body reacts to stress to reduce its effects. Other methods, such as acupuncture and relaxation, may help relieve stress. Counseling can also help if you think your migraines may be related to depression or anxiety.

For More Information:

American Council for Headache Education (ACHE)

Phone: (856) 423-0258

Internet Address: <http://www.achenet.org>

Migraine Awareness Group: A National Understanding For Migraineurs (MAGNUM)

Phone Number: (703) 739-9384

Internet Address: <http://www.migraines.org>