

Migraine headache

Emergency Department factsheets



What is a migraine?

Migraines are severe headaches that usually begin on one side of the head (often behind the eye) and spread to the whole head. Migraines can last from two hours to a few days. Migraines affect around one in ten people. They are three times more common in females and tend to affect young people who are otherwise healthy. Most people who get migraines will have a family member with the same problem.

What causes a migraine?

The cause of migraines is unclear. Studies suggest that a migraine is caused by swelling of the blood vessels in the scalp and tissues around the brain, causing more blood to pump through the brain. Changes in brain activity and chemicals also appear to play a part.

Doctors believe there are 'triggers' that bring on a migraine, although finding out an individual's trigger is not always easy.

Some common triggers include:

- alcohol, especially red wine
- flickering lights from a TV or computer screen
- heat, light (glare), or noise
- chemicals, such as those found in petrol and perfume
- cheese, coffee, nuts, chocolate, oranges, tomatoes, some food additives and preservatives
- hunger
- hormonal changes, such as periods, hormone pills and menopause
- exercise
- emotions, such as stress, excitement or fatigue
- relaxation – after a stressful working week, you relax and a migraine attack occurs.

What are the symptoms?

Migraine pain can be throbbing, pulsing or squeezing and it gets worse with movement and normal activities. Other symptoms include:

- a warning sign (aura) such as blurred vision, flashing lights, numbness, tingling and funny smells
- nausea and vomiting
- a dislike for bright lights
- a dislike for loud noises.

The attacks may be few and far between, or frequent and severe. Migraines are often unpredictable.

Treatment

Migraines vary between people and so does the treatment. There are many new treatments that can be used for an attack. If a migraine is in the early stages, simple medications such as aspirin or aspalgin (contains aspirin and codeine) usually 900 mg (or three tablets) and anti-nausea medication may be enough to provide relief. Tell your doctor or health care professional if you are unable to take aspirin.

If the pain is severe, stronger medications (usually intravenous – into the vein through 'a drip') and hospital treatment may be necessary. Pethidine is no longer used to treat a migraine as more effective medications are now available.

Usually, no tests are needed unless the doctor feels there may be another reason for your symptoms.

Home care

Simple measures may help you deal with a migraine at home such as:

- lie in a quiet, cool, dark room
- place a cold flannel on your forehead or neck
- do not drink coffee, tea or orange juice
- avoid moving around too much
- try to relax through meditation or listening to music
- do not read or watch television
- some people find relief from 'sleeping off' an attack
- take painkillers as directed by your doctor.

If you have another attack, take your anti-migraine medication or simple pain relief and lie down in a dark, quiet place. The earlier you start treatment the better. Take medication only as directed.

What to expect

For most people the pain stops and they feel well again. You may be left with a 'hangover' that may last several hours or days. This can leave you weak and tired with a mild headache. You may need to stay home from work or school.

If you have frequent attacks, there are daily treatments that can help. Migraines tend to get less frequent and less severe as you get older.

Prevention

Think about what may have caused the attack and avoid that 'trigger'. For example, avoid red wine if you suspect this is the cause.

Ask your doctor about treatment options to prevent or reduce attacks.

Complementary treatments may help, although research is lacking. Examples include relaxation (yoga, and meditation), acupuncture, aromatherapy, biofeedback and hypnotherapy.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

Want to know more?

Visit the Headache and Migraine Information

www.headache.com.au

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