



## **Migraines: why are they such a headache?**

### **First things first, how to tell a normal headache from a migraine**

Yes, your head is pounding, and physical exertion will definitely make it feel worse. But migraines have a number of other symptoms to look out for, which do vary from person to person.

### **Migraine symptoms**

A migraine attack can last anywhere from a few hours to 72 hours. Each attack can have different symptoms, and attacks can vary in frequency. You may experience some or all of the following symptoms:

- **Aura.** This means you may see flickering spots, lines or lights, and even experience blurry vision. Aura usually signals a migraine is coming, before you feel any pain. This can be coupled with a sensitivity to both light and noise.
- **Sinus symptoms** like a blocked nose, eyes that water or sinus pressure and pain.
- **Throbbing pain** that typically pulsates only on one side of the head, or behind the eyes. Usually described as 'pounding' pain.
- **Nausea** that could lead to vomiting.
- **Feeling lightheaded** or faint.
- **Neck pain.**

- **Numbness** or a tingling sensation, typically on one side of the body. If experienced, consult a doctor immediately as this could also be a symptom of a stroke.

## What causes migraines?

There is no known cause for migraine headaches. It is theorised that they are due to activity in the brain that temporarily changes the nerve signals, blood flow and chemicals in the brain.

There is evidence though that some people are genetically predisposed to them. These migraine attacks often start in childhood, during puberty or early adulthood.

There are certain 'triggers' that can cause migraines. It can be helpful to keep a migraine journal so that you can start to identify when and why yours begin.

Common triggers include:

- **A lack of sleep** or change in sleeping habits due to jet lag, for example.
- **Certain food and drinks**, especially processed foods. Other potential triggers are bananas, chocolate, caffeine, alcohol (especially red wine), citrus fruit and aged cheeses.
- **Dehydration.**
- **Physical or emotional stress** or tension and anxiety.
- **Sensory stimulation** such as bright lights, strong smells or loud noises.
- **Hormonal changes** in women, especially during menstruation or menopause. Some women's attacks grow more severe during pregnancy, while others find that their attacks improve.

## Prevention is better than cure

There are ways to help minimise your chance of migraines.

Consult your doctor about making healthy changes to your diet and exercise routine. You may need to give up alcohol, caffeine and certain foods to rule out triggers.

Reducing stress is also crucial, though admittedly easier said than done. Try some relaxation techniques like meditation and yoga. Cognitive behavioural therapy may also help by alleviating stress, as can massage therapy and even acupuncture.

Remember to stay hydrated and get enough sleep!

## Treatment and tips

Apparently, ancient Greeks and Romans used to apply raw potato, onion or cabbage to their heads to help with headaches. This is no longer the recommended route!

### ***In the short term***

You can turn to a number of over-the-counter painkillers to help during an attack. Remember to try and take them as early as possible to ward off the most severe pain.



Hot and cold compresses on the neck, head or eyes can also help, as can lying in a quiet, dark room until the attack passes.

### ***Long-term treatment***

If you have frequent migraines, typically considered as over four a month and if your attacks last more than 12 hours, you can consult your doctor about long-term medications like anti-inflammatory drugs, antidepressants or anti-seizure drugs which can help to prevent attacks.

If you're a woman and your migraines seem hormone-related, try to avoid medications with estrogen in them, such as certain birth control pills. Speak to your doctor about alternatives.

With a healthy lifestyle and the right pain management, migraines can be overcome.