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What Is Migraine, Migraine Causes And Treatment

Migraines are a common and often severe form of headache that may recur time and time again. They affect about one in eight people. Your GP can advise you whether or not your headaches are a form of migraine, as migraines have characteristic features. Migraine headaches usually last for hours to days at a time and are often throbbing and one-sided.



They are sometimes associated with nausea or vomiting and can be sufficiently severe to stop any attempt at work or other activities. Many migraine sufferers are forced to seek out a quiet, darkened room where they can rest until the headache has passed. Migraine headaches come and go unpredictably and many sufferers cannot predict when the next attack is likely to occur. There are now a number of very good forms of treatment and you should ask your GP for advice about sensible use of medication to treat attacks.

What Causes Migraine?

The pain and other symptoms of migraine are due to changes occurring both within the brain itself and in the blood vessels and other tissues that surround the brain. The migraine comes from the swelling and bruising of these blood vessels and tissues. But it is not understood what mechanism starts each attack. You may have inherited a predisposition for migraines from one or both of your parents, as migraines tend to run in families. However, some people who suffer from migraines have no other family members who are affected.

Trigger Factors For Migraine

You may already be aware that certain things are likely to trigger a migraine attack. Common triggers include certain foods, alcohol, hot weather, changes in sleep (either too much sleep or lack of sleep), stress and neck pain. Women often find that migraines are triggered by their menstrual cycle. If you have not thought about looking for triggers, you should keep a diary of when your migraines started and the foods you ate, as well as activities you did in the few hours before each attack. After keeping this diary for two or three months, you can look back and see if there is any consistent pattern that may indicate a trigger which can be avoided in the future. Unfortunately, many people find that triggers only account for a small percentage of their migraine attacks.

Lifestyle Factors

Stress, overwork and irregular sleep patterns (that occur, for example, with shift work) are common triggers that increase the number of migraine attacks. Migraines often occur at the end of a stressful period, for example, you may find that your migraines occur when you go away on holidays or, if you work Monday to Friday, they may occur on the weekend. The best treatment for this problem is to recognise and reduce the stress and anxiety in your life. A daily program of relaxation (for example, listening to relaxation tapes, performing yoga or having a massage) can be very helpful.

Treatment Of An Attack Of Migraine

There are simple measures that can be used early in a migraine attack which can be helpful in relieving some of the symptoms. These measures include lying down in a quiet, darkened room, using hot or cold compresses or sensible use of painkillers such as aspirin or paracetamol. However, this is often not enough to relieve severe migraine symptoms. Ask your GP about specific medications that are very effective in treating migraines. Nausea is very common during migraines and is a sign that your stomach will not absorb medication efficiently (you may even vomit it up). This is why early treatment of an attack is so vital. Your GP can advise you about medication.

Prevention Of Migraine

If you get a migraine more than once or twice a week you may need preventative medication. Using painkillers more than a few times per week is not recommended as over time, this can lead to the development of analgesic or 'rebound' headaches which are headaches that are triggered by the use of painkillers. You should ask your GP for advice about suitable preventative medication if your migraine headaches occur this frequently.

Migraine In Children

Migraine can occur at all ages, even in children. Fortunately, it is uncommon for migraine to occur in children under the age of five. If your child has unexplained recurrent headaches, particularly if there is a history of migraine in the family, then you should seek advice from your GP. Occasionally, migraine can occur in children as recurrent stomach pain, without headache. As the child grows older, the stomach pains subside and may be replaced by headaches. Many children outgrow their migraine headaches.

Managing Migraine

- * Look for triggers that may be causing your migraines and adjust your lifestyle to avoid them
- * Start a daily program of relaxation to reduce the number of attacks you suffer
- * Seek advice about the best medication to use and take your medicines early in the attack so they have the best chance of working
- * Explain to your friends and workmates what a migraine is like so that they can understand how the attacks affect your life

Useful Contacts:

British Brain and Spine Foundation

Address: 3.36 Canterbury Court, Kennington Park, 1-3 Brixton Road, London, SW9 6DE

Telephone: 020 7793 5900

Fax: 020 7793 5939

Email: info[at]brainandspine.org.uk

Website URL: brainandspine.org.uk

The Pain Research Institute

Address: Clinical Sciences Centre, University Hospital Aintree, Lower Lane, Liverpool, L9 7AL

Telephone: 0151 529 5820

Fax: 0151 529 5821

Contact Name: Mr D Emsley

Email: pri[at]liv.ac.uk

Website URL: liv.ac.uk/pri/

Migraine Action Association

Address: 4th Floor, 27 East Street, Leicester, LE1 6NB

Telephone: 0116 275 8317

Email: info[at]migraine.org.uk

Website URL: migraine.org.uk

PMS Help

Address: PO Box 83, Hereford, HR4 8YQ

The Migraine Trust

Address: 52-53 Russell Square, London, WC1B 4HP

Telephone: 0207 631 6970

Fax: 0207 436 2888

Email: info[at]migrainetrust.org

Website URL: migrainetrust.org

The Neurological Alliance

Address: 165 Queen's Gate, London, SW7 5HE

Telephone: 0207 584 6457

Email: admin[at]neural.org.uk

Website URL: neural.org.uk

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