



## Patient Information

# Understanding Migraines

Twenty-eight million Americans experience migraines. Although both genders are affected, studies show that more women than men get migraines, and 25% of all women with migraines have four or more attacks a month.

### Causes of Migraines

The exact causes of migraines are unknown. However, research points to changes in the brain and genetics. Researchers believe that migraines may be caused by inherited abnormalities in certain areas of the brain. Four out of five people with migraines have a family history of migraines.

### Triggers & Coexisting Conditions

Many migraines seem to be triggered by external factors and are associated with some medical conditions. Possible triggers and coexisting conditions include:

- Sensitivity to specific chemicals and preservatives in foods, such as aged cheese, alcoholic beverages and food additives like nitrates and monosodium glutamate.
- Emotional stress. During stressful events, chemicals in the brain are released to combat the situation, which provokes vascular changes that can cause a migraine.
- Excessive caffeine consumption or withdrawal from caffeine.
- Storm fronts, changes in barometric pressure, strong winds or changes in altitude.
- Menstrual periods, tension, excessive fatigue, skipping meals and changes in sleep patterns.
- Asthma, chronic fatigue syndrome, hypertension, Raynaud's phenomenon (narrowing of blood vessels that causes pain and discoloration, usually in the fingers), stroke and sleep disorders.

### Symptoms

Migraine pain is characterized by the following:

- Type of pain: pounding or throbbing. The headache begins as a dull ache and develops into throbbing pain, which is often aggravated by physical activity.
- Severity: described as mild, moderate or severe.
- Location: Pain can shift from one side of the head to the other, be concentrated in the front of the head, or encompass the whole head.

- Duration: Most migraines last about 4 hours, but severe ones can last up to a week.

- Frequency: Migraine frequency varies widely. Some people experience two to four headaches per month, and others get a migraine only once or twice a year.

Additional symptoms include: sensitivity to light, noise and odors; nausea and vomiting, stomach upset and abdominal pain; loss of appetite; sensations of being warm or cold; paleness; fatigue; dizziness, blurred vision; diarrhea; and fever (rare).

### Types of Migraines

Migraines can be classified in two types:

- Migraines with aura: Known as classic migraine, 20% to 30% of people with migraines experience these. An aura can occur 1 hour before the migraine and can last up to 60 minutes. Visual auras include bright flashing dots or lights, blind spots, distorted vision, temporary vision loss and wavy or jagged lines. Other auras may include ringing in the ears or changes in smell, taste or touch.

- Migraines without aura: These are more common, occurring in 80% to 85% of people with migraines. Several hours before the onset of the headache, you can experience vague symptoms, including anxiety, depression and fatigue.

### Treatment & Prevention

Many medications are available to treat migraines, including over-the-counter pain relievers, anti-nausea medicines, abortive medicines (used at the first sign of a migraine to stop the process that causes the headache pain) and preventive (prophylactic) medications that reduce the frequency and severity of the headaches and are generally taken on a daily basis.

Migraines can be prevented or minimized by identifying and then avoiding migraine triggers. Track patterns and triggers by keeping a headache diary. In it, record what you ate prior to an attack and make the necessary dietary changes to avoid these chemical triggers. Stress management, coping techniques, relaxation training and moderate exercise can help prevent or reduce the severity of attacks. Eating on a regular schedule and getting adequate rest also help.

For more information on migraines, talk to your nurse practitioner.

—Information adapted from patient information provided by the Department of Neurology at The Cleveland Clinic in Ohio.

### Additional Notes:

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