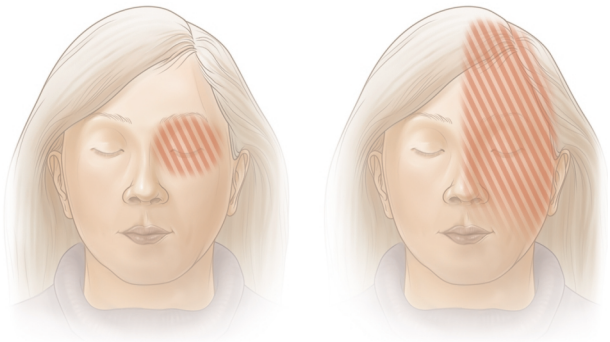
Headaches: Migraines



Migraines are painful, throbbing headaches that often start on one side of the head. The pain may move from one side of your head to the other, or you may feel it on both sides at the same time. When you have a migraine, it may be so painful that you are not able to do your usual activities. A migraine may make you feel sick to your stomach and vomit. It may also make you sensitive to light, sound, or smell.

A few people have an aura before the migraine begins. When you have an aura, you may first see spots, wavy lines, or flashing lights. Your hands, arms, or face may tingle or feel numb. But most people do not have auras.

Without treatment, migraines can last from 4 hours to a few days.

How are migraines treated?

Your doctor may want you first to try an over-the-counter pain medicine, such as ibuprofen or naproxen. Brand names include Advil, Motrin, and Aleve.

If that medicine does not work, your doctor can prescribe stronger medicine that can help prevent or stop migraines.

- If your doctor prescribes medicine to use when you get a headache, take it at the first sign of a migraine. Do not wait, unless your doctor has given you other instructions.
- If your doctor prescribes medicine to use every day to help prevent migraines, take it exactly as prescribed.

Be careful when you use medicine to stop a migraine. Using this kind of medicine too often can cause rebound headaches. These are different from migraine headaches. Rebound headaches occur after the pain medicine has worn off, which leads you to take another dose of medicine. After a while, you get a headache whenever you stop taking the medicine.

What can you do when you get a migraine?

When you feel a migraine starting:

- Stop what you are doing, and take your medicine. Do not wait for the migraine to get worse. Take your medicine exactly as your doctor told you to. Keep your medicine with you at all times so you are ready when a headache starts.
- Rest in a quiet, dark room until your headache is gone. Close your eyes and try to relax or go to sleep. Do not watch TV or read.
- Put a cold, moist cloth or cold pack on the painful area for 10 to 20 minutes at a time. Put a thin cloth between the cold pack and your skin.

- Have someone gently massage your neck and shoulders.
- Do not drive until you know how your migraine medicine affects you. Medicines to stop a migraine may make you drowsy.

How can you prevent migraines?

You can take steps to help prevent migraines.

Take medicines

If your doctor has prescribed medicine to prevent migraines, take it exactly as prescribed.

Find and avoid migraine triggers

- Keep a headache diary to find out what brings on your migraines (triggers). Avoiding triggers may help you prevent migraines. In your diary, write down:
  - When a migraine begins, how long it lasts, and what the pain was like (throbbing, aching, stabbing, or dull). If you are a woman, note if the migraine occurred near your period.
  - Any symptoms you had with your migraine, such as nausea, flashing lights or dark spots, or sensitivity to bright light or loud noise.
  - What you think might have triggered your migraine. Triggers may include certain foods (chocolate, cheese, wine) or odors, smoke, bright light, stress, or lack of sleep.
- If you are a woman and taking birth control pills or hormone therapy, ask your doctor if they could be migraine triggers.

Build healthy habits

- Find healthy ways to deal with stress. Migraines are most common during or right after stressful times. Take time to relax before and after you do something that has caused a migraine in the past.
- Try to keep the muscles in your jaw, face, neck, and shoulders relaxed and maintain good posture. When sitting, change positions often, and stretch for 30 seconds each hour.
- Keep a daily routine. This is one of the best ways to avoid migraines. For example, try to eat at the same times every day, and go to sleep at a regular time. Changes from your routine, such as skipping meals or staying up really late, could lead to a migraine.
- Avoid foods and drinks that often trigger migraines. These include chocolate, alcohol (especially red wine and port), aspartame, and monosodium glutamate (MSG). Some additives found in foods (like hot dogs, bacon, cold cuts, aged cheeses, and pickled foods) also can be triggers.
- Limit caffeine by not drinking too much coffee, tea, or soda. But do not quit caffeine suddenly, because that can cause migraines.
- Do not allow others to smoke around you. If you smoke, try to quit. If you need help quitting, talk to your doctor about medicines and counseling. They can help you quit for good.

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