

What is a migraine?

A migraine is a brain disorder that makes people predisposed to frequent headaches. We call migraine a ‘primary’ headache disorder. This means that headaches are not happening because of another cause such as a brain tumour or stroke. Migraine headaches usually last 4 to 72 hours without treatment. For your doctor to diagnose migraine, 2 of these 4 features are required:

1. Headache affects one side of your head (unilateral)
2. Headache is moderate to severe
3. Headache gets worse if you are active
4. Throbbing pain in your head

And 1 of these 2 features are also required for the diagnoses:

1. Nausea and/or vomiting
2. Sensitivity to light and sound

Headache is not the only problem

About 70% of patients have warning signs before the headache. These can include yawning, irritability, fatigue, and change in appetite. About 30% of patients have an aura. The most common type of aura is a change in your sight. You might see dark or coloured spots, sparkles or zig-zag lines. The aura typically starts before the headache and can last from 5 to 60 minutes. After the headache, you may have changes in your mood, feel tired, or change in appetite.

What causes migraine?

10 to 15% of people have migraine. It is thought to be a genetic disorder that makes your nervous system hypersensitive and vulnerable to ‘triggers’. Keep a headache diary to learn what your possible triggers are. Then you can try to avoid them. Triggers for migraine may include:

Foods: caffeine, chocolate, citrus, dairy, alcohol, aspartame, MSG, processed foods & meats, which often contain nitrates

Other factors: hormonal changes, bright lights, loud noise, weather, stress, or mood changes.

Here’s a [detailed handout](#) you can review about triggers.

What is chronic migraine?

Chronic migraine is a term to describe headaches that occur at least 15 days each month with 8 migraine type headaches per month. Between 1 and 3% of the population suffers from chronic migraine. About half of chronic migraine sufferers will have headaches caused by overusing certain pain medications. Risk factors for changing from occasional (episodic) to chronic migraine include a history of head trauma, obesity, poor sleep, mood problems, snoring, excess caffeine and medication overuse.

What is medication overuse headache?

Medication overuse headache (also called rebound headache) is caused by taking too much headache medication such as triptans, acetaminophen, anti-inflammatory medications such as ibuprofen, butalbital substances, and other pain medications including opioids. In general, if you have migraines, you should avoid opioids or narcotics, as there is a high risk of giving you a medication overuse headache afterwards and there may be other medications effective for migraine. Discuss all therapies with your doctor before starting any treatment option to ensure it is safe for you.

Lifestyle

- Cut down on caffeine. Is it really worth the headache? Caffeine can be effective in helping to abort a migraine episode but caffeine taken on a daily basis can contribute to frequent migraines. Kick the habit; consider herb tea.
- Keep yourself hydrated by drinking at least 8 cups of water a day.
- Migraines thrive on fluctuations in your life. The goals of these lifestyle changes are to minimize these fluctuations
- **Reduce stress:** We cannot lead stress free lives but coping with stress is possible. There are number of approaches including journaling, walking, meditation, yoga, and biofeedback. Pick one to try.
- **Maintain a healthy sleep routine:** Go to sleep at the same time every night & wake up at the same time every morning whether it is a weekend or weeknight. Too much sleep or too little sleep can be a trigger for migraine.
- **Exercise:** Try walking 30 minutes per day. Check out this fun [video](#) about walking from Dr. Mike Evans

Medications to treat migraine

Take medications as prescribed to avoid worsening the headache. Be careful not to overuse pain medications

Migraine medications are divided into acute (symptomatic or abortive) therapy and preventative (prophylactic) therapy.

Acute therapies

NSAIDs (non-steroid anti-inflammatory drugs) such as Aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil), naproxen

Acetaminophen (Tylenol)

Triptans (such as sumatriptan)

Anti-nausea medications (such as metoclopramide and dimenhydrinate)

Ergotamines (rarely used due to side effects)

Preventative therapies (treatment given to reduce the number and severity of your headaches)

Antidepressants (amitriptyline, venlafaxine)

Anti-seizure medications (topiramate, valproic acid)

Blood pressure medications (Propranolol, Candesartan)

Botox (for chronic migraine only)

Natural remedies (these 3 have a strong recommendation the Canadian Headache Society Guidelines)

- Magnesium Citrate 200 mg three times / day
- Riboflavin (vitamin B2) 400 mg/day
- Coenzyme Q10 100 mg three times/day

Acute headache therapies

Treat your headaches as soon as you possibly can. Delaying treatment makes it more likely that you will not get full relief and that the headache will come back.

If you take acute pain/headache therapies more than 2 days per week, you can get a medication overuse headache.

Medications called ergotamines and triptans make your blood vessels narrower. Do NOT use them if you have a history of heart attack, stroke, severe uncontrolled blood pressure, or are pregnant.

Preventive headache therapies

Preventive medications are taken every day. It is a good idea to start at a low dose with a gradual increase over time to minimize the possible side effects. Take the preventive medication for at least 3 to 4 months at the maximum tolerated dose before you decide whether it is not working. Talk to your doctor about preventive headache therapies if:

- You have headaches more than 1 day a week
- You have moderate or severe headaches that do not get better with the acute headache therapies described above
- You cannot use any acute headache therapies
- You are using acute headache therapies more than 2 days per week
- You have significant disability associated with your migraines