

## What is a migraine?

Migraines are severe headaches that usually begin on one side of the head (often behind the eye) and spread to the whole head. Migraines can last from two hours to a few days.

Migraines affect around one in 10 people. They are three times more common in females and tend to affect young people who are otherwise healthy. Most people who get migraines will have a family member with the same problem.

## What causes a migraine?

The cause of migraines is unclear.

Studies suggest that a migraine is caused by swelling of the blood vessels in the scalp and tissues around the brain, causing more blood to pump through the brain. Changes in brain activity and chemicals also appear to play a part.

Doctors believe there are 'triggers' that bring on a migraine, although finding out an individual's trigger is not always easy. Some common triggers include:

- alcohol, especially red wine
- flickering lights from a TV or computer screen
- heat, light (glare), or noise
- chemicals, such as those found in petrol and perfume
- cheese, coffee, nuts, chocolate, oranges, tomatoes, some food additives and preservatives
- hunger
- hormonal changes – periods, hormone pills and menopause
- exercise
- emotions – stress, excitement or fatigue
- relaxation – after a stressful working week, you relax and a migraine attack occurs.

## What are the symptoms?

Migraine pain can be throbbing, pulsing or squeezing and it gets worse with movement and normal activities. Other symptoms include:

- a warning sign (aura) such as blurred vision, flashing lights, numbness, tingling and funny smells
- nausea and vomiting
- a dislike for bright lights
- a dislike for loud noises.

The attacks may be few and far between, or frequent and severe. Migraines are often unpredictable.

## Treatment

Migraines vary between people and so does the treatment.

There are many new treatments that can be used for an attack.

If a migraine is in the early stages, simple medications such as aspirin (usually 900 mg or three tablets) and anti-nausea medication may be enough to provide relief. Tell your doctor or health care professional if you are unable to take aspirin.

If the pain is severe, stronger medications (usually *intravenous* – into the vein through 'a drip') and hospital treatment may be necessary.

*Pethidine* is no longer used to treat a migraine as more effective medications are now available.

Usually, no tests are needed unless the doctor feels there may be another reason for your symptoms.

## Home care

Simple measures may help you deal with a migraine at home.

- Lie in a quiet, cool, dark room.
- Place a cold flannel on your forehead or neck.
- Do not drink coffee, tea or orange juice.
- Avoid moving around too much.
- Try to relax through meditation or listening to music.
- Do not read or watch television.
- Do not drive.
- Some people find relief from 'sleeping off' an attack.
- Take painkillers as directed by your doctor.

If you have another attack, take your anti-migraine medication or simple pain relief and lie down in a dark, quiet place. The earlier you start treatment the better. Take medication only as directed.

If your headache is severe, is not like the usual pattern, does not respond to the usual pain relief medication, or is associated with arm or leg weakness, speech difficulty, fever, drowsiness or confusion, you should seek urgent medical care.

## What to expect

For most people the pain stops and they feel well again. You may be left with a 'hangover' that lasts several hours or days. This can leave you weak and tired with a mild headache.

You may need to stay home from work or school.

If you have frequent attacks, there are daily treatments that can help. Migraines tend to get less frequent and less severe as you get older.

## Prevention

- Think about what may have caused the attack and avoid that 'trigger'. For example, avoid red wine if you suspect this is the cause.
- Ask your doctor about treatment options to prevent or reduce attacks.
- Complementary treatments may help, although research is lacking. Examples include relaxation (yoga and meditation), acupuncture, aromatherapy, biofeedback and hypnotherapy.

### Notes:

## Seeking help



**In a medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).



For other medical problems see your local doctor or health care professional.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.\*

**NURSE-ON-CALL** provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

\*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



## Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit a physiotherapist, chiropractor or osteopath.
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**  
[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)
- Visit the **Headache and Migraine Information Site**  
[www.headache.com.au](http://www.headache.com.au)

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 0578 or email [edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au](mailto:edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au)



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