

# Migraine

**Migraines are severe headaches, often felt on only one side of the head. They usually also involve other symptoms that can be as distressing as the head pain. Migraines are unpredictable and can occur as often as several times a week or as seldom as once or twice a year.**

There are two main types of migraine.

## **Migraine with aura (classic migraine)**

– Migraine with aura is preceded or accompanied by an aura, which may last up to an hour. Common aura symptoms include visual disturbances (e.g., seeing spots, flashing lights, zigzag lines, blurred vision), dizziness, numbness, pins and needles and speech disturbances.

**Migraine without aura (common migraine)** – About 60% of migraine sufferers do not get an aura.

## **Signs and symptoms**

Some people get warning signs (prodrome) up to 24 hours before a migraine starts. Warning signs include mood swings, changes in appetite, thirst and sleepiness.

A migraine headache can last from four hours to three days.

Common symptoms include:

- Moderate to severe pain
- Throbbing
- Often on one side of the head, but may swap sides between attacks
- Nausea and vomiting
- Sensitivity to light and noise
- Pain worsens with movement or activity
- Pain limits normal activities.

In children, migraines are often shorter lasting, the pain is often on both sides or in the middle of the head and other symptoms (e.g., nausea, vomiting) may be more prominent.

## Trigger factors

A tendency to get migraines can be inherited. Some people find certain things seem to trigger their migraines. Triggers are not the same for everyone and one person may have different triggers at different times.

Common triggers include:

- Stress or relaxing after stress (e.g., weekend migraine)
- Hormone changes (e.g., menstruation, pregnancy)
- Glare, bright or flickering light
- Strong smells or fumes
- Weather, air pressure and altitude changes
- Smoke, particularly from cigarettes
- Dehydration
- Alcohol
- Caffeine withdrawal
- Inadequate sleep
- Delaying or missing meals
- Certain foods and food additives (e.g., chocolate, citrus fruit, red wine, aged cheese, MSG)
- Certain medicines (e.g., oral contraceptives, overuse of pain relievers)
- Strenuous exercise, including sex
- Back and neck problems
- Eye strain.

## Relieving migraine

During a migraine it is best to rest in a quiet, darkened room and avoid

movement or activity. Medicines can help relieve migraine and are most effective if taken at the onset of the pain. As a migraine progresses, it can disrupt the normal passage of medicine (and food) from the stomach into the intestine (called gastric stasis).

This means oral pain relievers (and other medicines) may not be absorbed properly during a migraine.

Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice about medicines to relieve migraine.

They include:

- Simple non-prescription pain relievers (e.g., paracetamol, aspirin, ibuprofen). Soluble tablets, dissolved in water, are absorbed quickly and may give faster relief
- Migraine-specific medicines (e.g., naratriptan, sumatriptan, zolmitriptan)
- Anti-nausea medicines (e.g., metoclopramide). Can stop nausea and vomiting and also improve the absorption of other migraine medicines.

**Note:** When migraine relieving medicines are used frequently (more than 10–15 days a month) they can actually cause headaches.

## Preventing migraine

- If you have frequent migraines, your doctor may prescribe a daily preventive medicine to reduce the frequency and severity of migraines. Medicines that prevent migraines will not relieve a migraine once it has started.

- Some complementary therapies, physical therapies and lifestyle changes may help prevent migraine.

## Self care

Lifestyle strategies to help manage migraine include:

- Keep a headache diary to identify headache pattern, possible triggers and helpful treatments
- Avoid migraine triggers if possible
- Work out a migraine management plan with your doctor. Know what to do when a migraine occurs
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week
- Eat regular healthy meals, including plenty of fruits, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises otherwise)
- Limit caffeine intake (e.g., tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks)
- Limit alcohol intake
- Don't smoke
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to relax your mind and body
- Get enough sleep
- Wear sunglasses to reduce glare
- Pay attention to your posture. Take regular breaks if you work in the same position all day.

## Important

A headache can be a symptom of a serious medical condition. Doctors and pharmacists can help identify the type and cause of a headache and advise on treatment. Consult a doctor if:

- Headache continues for longer than 3 days
- You have a sudden, severe or new type of headache
- Headaches are severe, get worse or become more frequent
- Aura symptoms do not disappear after headache stops
- Headache occurs with confusion, drowsiness, vomiting, fever, stiff neck, rash, seizures, stroke-like symptoms
- Headache wakes you at night
- Headache occurs with eye pain or loss of sight
- Headaches start after the age of 50
- Headaches start after a head injury or an accident
- Headaches start while on oral contraceptive pill or HRT
- Headache starts after exercise, sex, straining or coughing
- Headaches occur more than 15 days in a month
- A child under 18 years has migraine symptoms.

**Note:** Children under 16 years should not be given aspirin, unless advised by a doctor.

## For more information

### **Headache Australia**

Phone: 1300 886 660

Website: [www.headacheaustralia.org.au](http://www.headacheaustralia.org.au)

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### **Independent Living Centres Australia**

Phone: 1300 885 886

Website: [www.ilcaustralia.org](http://www.ilcaustralia.org)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### **National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.  
Ask a pharmacist for advice when  
choosing a medicine.***

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