

Migraine Headache

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Migraine headache is common, occurring in 14 to 15 % of the general adult population. It occurs more frequently in women 18% than in men 5-6 %. Age at onset of migraine headache is 10 to 12 years old in boys and 14 to 16 years old in girls, however, attacks may start at any age. Migraines peak at about 40 years old and then gradually decline thereafter. The median frequency of attacks is 1.5 episodes per month and the median duration of attack is 24 hours.

Typical symptoms of migraine headache include: a dull throbbing, steady pain that may only involve one half of the head. Associated symptoms include nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light or loud sounds. Symptoms may be made worse by coughing bending over laying flat or any strenuous activity. Patients typically will prefer to sit up or be in a partially reclined position since laying flat may make the symptoms worse. Exact migraine symptoms are individual to each patient. Some may experience headache and intense nausea and vomiting while others may experience a mild headache and extreme sensitivity to light.

Some people will experience an aura, which is a symptom that develops gradually over 5 to 20 minutes. It may last up to one hour then subsides to be followed within 1 hour by the typical headache symptoms. Aura symptoms may include: sensation of flashing lights in the corner of your vision, tingling, numbness, strange taste, or just the sensation that, "I'm going to have a headache." Only 15% of migraine patients will get an aura before their migraine.

There are several different classes of medications that can be used to treat migraine headaches. Some will stop a migraine from coming or stop it from getting as bad as it could. Generally when you feel a migraine headache coming on, you should stop what you are doing, if possible, and take your medication and find a quiet area in which to rest. This may stop the headache from becoming full blown and save you hours of pain.

Nonspecific treatments include Acetaminophen (Tylenol), Ibuprofen and Naproxen. These medications are effective for many migraine headache sufferers.

Migraine specific medications include a family of medications called triptans. They work by adjusting the blood vessels to stop the cause of the pain. They should not be used if you have high blood pressure, poor circulation, had a stroke or heart attack. Your doctor can make sure if this is the correct medication for you. A common example of a triptan is Sumatriptan, trade name Imitrex.

There are other medications used in hospital and emergency department settings that are very effective against migraine headaches. These medications are generally more effective if given early in the course of a headache.

There are several preventive medications that your doctor can prescribe to prevent, or at least decrease the frequency, of your migraines. Your doctor can help you choose the right medication taking into consideration your medical history and medications.

Warning signs include headache with: loss of consciousness, weakness of an arm or leg, visual disturbance, face droop, slurred speech, high fever, visual change or confusion. If the headache

pattern is a big change from your usual headache pattern, you should contact your doctor.