

# Migraines

Migraine is a type of headache and a recognised medical condition. It is more severe than a headache. People who get migraines often describe the pain as pulsing or throbbing and usually on the side of the head. Migraine is quite common, affecting up to 18% of women and 6% of men. Migraines can be experienced from as little as once or twice a year, or as often as two or three times a week. A migraine attack can last from four hours to three days.

## Migraine symptoms

A migraine headache has different symptoms to other types of headache. Some of the symptoms include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Sensitivity to light
- Sensitivity to sound
- Affected vision, such as aura
- Sensitivity to smell and touch

See Table 1 for differences between migraines and other types of headaches.

## Causes of migraine

No one really knows what causes migraine. There is evidence that migraine is an inherited condition. For the migraine headache, it is thought to be due to widening of certain blood vessels in the head. This process stimulates the nearby sensory nerves that trigger pain and inflammation. One of the brain chemicals involved in this process is serotonin. It has been found that the levels of serotonin drop during migraine.

## Common migraine triggers

Many things can trigger a migraine. These include:

- **Diet** – chocolates, cheese, citrus fruits, alcohol (especially red wine), coffee, tea
- **Emotions** – stress, anxiety, excitement and fatigue

- **Sleep** – too much or too little
- **Menstrual cycle** – migraine occurs two to three times more frequently in women than men
- **Physiochemical** – excessive heat, light, noise, strong smells (from certain chemicals)
- **Relaxation (weekend migraines)** – often triggered by a period of stress and overwork followed by relaxation

Triggers vary between people and can even be different for the same person at different times.

## Treatments

Migraines vary greatly from person to person and so does the treatments. There are four options available to migraine sufferers:

- **Avoid trigger factors** – this can be difficult, as migraines are often triggered by a combination of factors
- **Drug treatment** – including pain killers (eg. paracetamol, paracetamol with codeine, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs “NSAIDs” like ibuprofen), triptans (see What are triptans?) and medication that alters pressure on blood vessels
- **Preventative treatment** – medications taken on a daily basis to reduce the number of attacks
- **Non-drug therapies** – including relaxation, yoga and meditation (see ‘Self-care’ box overleaf).



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**Arrow – Sumatriptan**  
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## What Kind of Headache Do You Have?

Ordinary Periodic "tension-type"	Chronic Daily <sup>1</sup>	Cluster	Migraine
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generally mild in intensity</li> <li>• Do not occur regularly, just every once in a while</li> <li>• Usually last 1/2 to 3 hours</li> <li>• Dull ache</li> <li>• Pain on both sides of head</li> <li>• Not throbbing</li> <li>• No nausea or vomiting</li> <li>• No visual disturbance or auras<sup>2</sup></li> <li>• Mild sensitivity to light or noise, but only one and never both</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be mild or severe in intensity</li> <li>• Occur at least 15 days per month for 3 months</li> <li>• Pain can be dull or stabbing and jolting (often described as ice pick like)</li> <li>• Last at least 4 hours if untreated</li> <li>• No nausea or vomiting</li> <li>• No visual disturbance or auras</li> <li>• Mild sensitivity to light and noise, if any</li> <li>• May result from overuse of pain relievers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pain is usually severe and centered on one side behind the eye or temple</li> <li>• Pain is sharp, stabbing</li> <li>• Short attacks usually last 30 minutes to one hour but can be up to 3 hours if untreated</li> <li>• Can be more than one attack a day and usually up to three</li> <li>• Come in waves, with attacks daily or near-daily for 2 weeks to 3 months and then disappear for months or even years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pain is moderate to severe and often located on one side</li> <li>• Often pulsating or throbbing</li> <li>• Periodic attacks (several a year to one or two a month) that last from 4 to 72 hours if untreated<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• Nausea with or without vomiting is quite common</li> <li>• Sensitivity to movement, light and/or noise common</li> <li>• May have auras or visual disturbances<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>

1. There are several types of chronic daily headache. Some may be the tension-type headaches that occur on 15 or more days a month. Others present with different symptoms, for example stabbing head pains that may come and go throughout the day. In the latter case, doctors will first try and rule out whether some other condition or disease is causing the headaches. 2. Auras are often visual disturbances but can also feel like numbness or weakness on one side of your body. For example, you may see dots or shapes or flickering lights. They can obscure your vision. Auras are associated with migraine and usually precede a migraine attack. See the migraine column. 3. Experience of at least five attacks that fit the criteria in this column lead to a diagnosis of migraine. Untreated, some attacks can last up to 72 hours. Migraine sufferers average about one attack a month but 10% of them will get an attack every week. And 20% have attacks that sometimes last 2 to 3 days. 4. About 1 in six migraine sufferers have auras. See note 2. Some migraine sufferers also have a sensation of numbness or a "pins and needles" feeling at various points on their body.

### What are triptans?

Triptans are a class of drugs used to treat migraine headaches. They mimic the actions of serotonin in the brain and make those widened blood vessels (in migraine attack) normal again to ease the symptoms of migraine. Examples of triptans are sumatriptan, zolmitriptan and naratriptan.

Triptan medicine should be taken as soon as the migraine starts. A majority of patients would find relief of their migraine headache within 1 to 2 hours. The time to pain relief can vary, depending on the severity of migraine. Triptans also help relieve other migraine symptoms such as nausea and vomiting, and sensitivity to light and noise.

**Arrow – Sumatriptan** containing sumatriptan (as succinate), is a prescription medicine effective for relieving migraine symptoms. It is available in 50 mg x 4 tablets and 100 mg x 2 tablets, both are listed in Pharmaceutical Schedule.

**Mygran™** contains 50 mg sumatriptan (as succinate) in a pack of 2 tablets. It is available as a Pharmacist Only over the counter (OTC) medicine. Making **Mygran™** available from the pharmacy makes it more accessible to more people. The availability of OTC **Mygran™** is a major step forward in migraine treatment.

Both **Arrow – Sumatriptan** and **Mygran™** are suitable for adults aged between 18 – 65 who have a stable and established pattern of migraine and who do not get satisfactory relief from general pain killers.

### Self-care



#### When you have a migraine attack:

- Turn out the lights around you
- Try temperature therapy with hot or cold compresses to your head or neck
- Massage the painful areas on head
- Avoid stressful activities
- Take your migraine medicines

#### Keep a migraine diary:

Note when your migraine started, the triggers, how long the migraine lasted and what, if anything, provided relief. These help identify the best treatment for you.

Combining the medicine therapy with healthy lifestyle choices is often the best way to manage migraine.

**Arrow – Sumatriptan** and **Mygran™** contain the active ingredient sumatriptan (as succinate). All medicines have benefits and risks. If you have concerns talk to your doctor or pharmacist. Always read the label and use strictly as directed.