

Patient information from the BMJ Group

Migraine

Migraine headaches can be very painful and get in the way of things you want to do. They're quite common. About 1 in 5 people get a migraine at some point. But there are good treatments that can help with pain and make your life easier.

What is it?

A migraine is a very severe headache. It may be so bad that all you feel like doing is lying down in a dark room. Doctors think that migraines happen when the blood vessels in your brain swell up. The swollen blood vessels cause pressure in your brain, which causes the pain. Although a migraine can be unpleasant, getting one doesn't mean there's anything seriously wrong.

What are the symptoms?

If you get migraines, you'll already know how bad they can be. Some people describe a throbbing pain that gets worse when they move. You may also feel sick or be extra-sensitive to light or noise. A migraine attack can last from a few hours to a few days.

Some people get warning signs before they have a migraine. These are called auras. If you have an aura, you may see flashing lights, have ringing in your ears, feel numb in parts of your body, or have trouble speaking.

What treatments work?

There are several good treatments for migraines, including medicines that were specially designed to get rid of them. There are also things you can do to help yourself.

Medicines

Most migraine treatments come as tablets. You take them when you feel an attack starting. Some people find they feel too sick to swallow tablets. If you have this problem, ask whether you can get your treatment as a tablet that dissolves in water or dissolves in your mouth, a nasal spray, or a suppository (a capsule that you put up your rectum).

Over-the-counter painkillers, such as aspirin, paracetamol, and ibuprofen can all help with migraines. They sometimes come combined with caffeine, with a drug to stop you feeling sick, or with another painkiller. You may want to avoid tablets pills with caffeine in if you're planning to rest. The brands Migralve and Solpadeine Plus contain paracetamol and a drug called codeine. Codeine is a strong painkiller, but the tablets you can buy from a chemist contain a very small dose. It probably doesn't give you much extra benefit.

Ibuprofen is a type of medicine called a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID). You can get stronger NSAIDs, or a higher dose, on prescription from your doctor.

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You need to be careful not to take painkillers too regularly. Taking them more than two or three times a week can cause more headaches. Your body gets used to the drug, and you have a headache when you stop taking it.

Ordinary painkillers don't usually have serious side effects. But make sure you don't take more than it says on the packet, as an overdose can be dangerous. Aspirin or ibuprofen can irritate your stomach if you take them a lot, but this shouldn't be a problem if you're only taking them occasionally. You shouldn't give aspirin to children under 16.

A group of drugs called **triptans** were specially designed to help with migraines. Some examples are eletriptan (brand name Relpax), sumatriptan (Imigran), and naratriptan (Naramig). You can buy one type of sumatriptan tablets yourself from a chemist. The brand name is Imigran Recovery. You can get the others on prescription from your doctor.

Triptans help about two-thirds of the people who take them. Even if your headache is very bad, it should go away or become less painful. Triptans may also help stop you feeling sick. They work within a couple of hours.

You shouldn't take triptans at the same time as other migraine drugs. Taking triptans along with some antidepressant drugs can also cause problems. If you need to take antidepressants, talk to your doctor about the best migraine drug for you. And you shouldn't take triptans if you have a medical condition that affects your heart.

Most other side effects of triptans are mild and don't last very long. A few people get pins and needles, feel dizzy, or have a warm feeling in part of their body. However, in lots of the research, people taking a dummy treatment (a placebo) also said they got side effects. So the problems people got may not have been because of the triptans they were taking.

How can I help myself?

For some people, particular things seem to trigger a migraine. Common triggers include lack of sleep, hunger, stress, or a particular food or drink. Some women find that they get migraines when their period starts.

Keeping a diary of your migraines could help you work out if there's anything that triggers them. If possible, you can then avoid your trigger. For example, keep a snack with you if hunger is a trigger. If stress is a trigger, you might want to learn some relaxation techniques, or try meditation or yoga. If the trigger is something you can't avoid, at least you can make sure you have your medicine with you.

It's helpful to learn to recognise the early signs of a migraine. You can then take your medicine straight away. You could carry a bottle of water if you prefer the kind of tablets that dissolve. Spotting an attack as it's coming on can also give you time to find somewhere comfortable to rest.

What will happen to me?

If you get migraines, you're likely to get them fairly regularly. The average is about one attack a month. Don't feel bad about having to take it easy or stay in bed when you get

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a migraine. Most people say that they can't carry on with normal activities during an attack.

If you have two or more migraines each month, or if your attacks are very bad, you may want to ask your doctor about treatments to prevent attacks. Drugs used to prevent migraines include beta-blockers, antidepressants, and an epilepsy drug called sodium valproate.

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