

HEALTH MANAGEMENT FACT SHEET

Migraine



Migraine is a very common health condition, which affects around one-in-five women and one-in-15 men.

It usually manifests as a moderate or severe throbbing headache, but a variety of other symptoms may occur during the migraine episode.

The exact cause of the condition is still unknown, however, migraines are thought to be related to temporary changes in brain chemicals, nerves and blood vessels.

Key takeaways

- > Migraines usually begin in early adulthood
- > Some sufferers experience migraines very frequently (up to a few times a week), while others only get them occasionally - and it can be possible for years to pass between migraines
- > Some sufferers experience warning symptoms (a sensory "aura") such as flashing lights before the headache begins
- > There is no cure, but avoiding known triggers - along with medical management, including painkillers / preventative medication - are effective for many people
- > Lying down in the dark helps many sufferers reduce symptoms
- > The outlook for migraines is very variable, but they generally improve with age

Symptoms and diagnosis

In some cases, changes in mood, energy, behaviour and appetite can occur several hours or days before a migraine episode.

Some individuals experience temporary warning symptoms (called an “aura”) before the migraine episode begins. These symptoms generally develop gradually over a few minutes and may last up to an hour. The aura symptoms might include seeing flashing lights, zig-zags or blind spots; numbness / tingling in the arms or face; dizziness and difficulty speaking.

Typical symptoms of the migraine episode itself include headache, feeling or being sick, and extreme sensitivity to bright light, loud sounds or smells. Less commonly, people may experience a variety of other associated symptoms, for example, sweating and feeling very hot or cold, difficulty concentrating, tummy pain and diarrhoea.

Some people have “silent migraines” where they experience an aura or other migraine symptoms but no headache.

Migraine episodes typically last between around four and 72 hours, with the symptoms gradually settling. Individuals may feel tired for a few days afterwards.

There may be an additional “prodromal” stage which occurs before the aura and brings changes in mood, energy and appetite. This can happen several hours or days before the migraine proper.

Potential triggers vary between individuals, but might include certain foods and drinks, missed meals, dehydration, hormonal changes, poor posture, neck / shoulder tension, stress, tiredness or poor sleep, and bright or flickering lights. Keeping a migraine diary may help to identify triggers.

There are no medical tests specifically for migraine, with diagnosis based on the pattern of symptoms. However, tests may sometimes be carried out to exclude other conditions.

The GP may consider referral to a neurologist if there is uncertainty about the diagnosis, if the symptoms are particularly frequent or severe, or if treatment is not effective.





Treatment and recovery

Although there is currently no cure for migraines, there are a number of treatments and other measures which can help the symptoms.

Most sufferers find that sleeping or lying down in a dark room is the best immediate option, while others find eating can help. Some people feel better after being sick.

Over-the-counter painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen can be effective - and are best taken as soon as possible after symptoms begin. However individuals should check first with their GP / pharmacist that these particular medications are appropriate and safe for them, and how often to take them.

If these are insufficient, a GP may prescribe medications called triptans in addition to painkillers. These work by reversing the temporary widening of brain blood vessels thought to lead to a migraine developing.

Anti-sickness medication can also be prescribed, and combination medicines which include painkilling and anti-sickness components are available from pharmacies.

Sometimes a course of acupuncture can be effective.

Sufferers are encouraged to become familiar with the triggers for their attacks, so they can be identified, managed and - if possible - avoided.

There are also several medicines and interventions which can play a preventative role, and which are usually suggested for more severe cases.

It is advisable to discuss the diagnosis and the treatment / prevention options with a GP.

Contact us to find out more

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 healthmanagement.co.uk



Useful resources

[NHS](#)

[The Migraine Trust](#)