

Migraines and Headaches

People who suffer from migraines will tell you that they are not the same as average headaches. They are usually quite painful and can disrupt daily life. This article will look at the difference between the two and help you understand what might start a migraine and how to deal with it.

What is a migraine?

A migraine is a type of headache that lasts between two and 72 hours and causes moderate to severe pain. People with migraines usually feel:

Throbbing pain only on one side of the head.

Pain that gets worse when they move around.

Pain that gets better with rest in a dark, quiet space.

Nausea.

Sensitivity to light, sound or smells.

About 25% of people who get migraines will have what's called an "aura" before or during an attack. An aura may cause:

Vision loss

Tingling

Numbness

Dizziness

Difficulty speaking

Visions of lights or bright zigzag flashes.

How is a migraine different than a regular headache?

A migraine is more than a simple headache. It has symptoms that are not found with common headaches such as sensitivity to light and smell. Headaches do not usually disrupt daily life. However, migraines can be very painful and make you miss work and other activities.

Can anyone get migraines?

Anyone can get migraines, including children. Migraines are three times more common in women than in men. It is thought that migraines might have something to do with hormones because migraines sometimes disappear during pregnancy and get worse during menopause.

What triggers a migraine?

The exact cause of migraines is not known – and the reasons may be different for each person. In some cases, certain foods, drinks or food additives may cause migraines. If you think those might be triggers, it may help to keep a diary where you record the foods you eat and when you get migraines. You may be able to figure out whether certain foods are the problem and then you can avoid that food.

Removing foods that trigger migraines should be safe as long as you don't stop eating entire food groups. If you do need to remove many foods, work with a Registered Dietitian on an eating plan so that all of your nutrient needs are being met.

Some of the common foods, drinks and additives that trigger migraines are:

Alcohol - especially red wine, beer and sherry.

Sulphites – found in dried fruit, canned vegetables, jam, wine and beer.

Tannins – found in tea and wine.

Aged and fermented cheeses - like Swiss and parmesan.

Tyramine – found in aged cheese, salted or smoked meat (salami, liverwurst) and soy-based products (miso, soy sauce).

Citrus – oranges, lemons, grapefruit.

Chocolate.

Monosodium glutamate (MSG) – for example, in Chinese food, sauces and salad dressings.

Nitrites – found in processed deli meats.

Artificial sweeteners such as aspartame and sucralose – for example, in sugarless gum and diet pop.

Fatty foods.

In addition to the foods listed above, migraines may be triggered by:

Fasting or skipping meals.

Being dehydrated – not having enough fluids.

Lack of sleep.

Too much sleep.

Bright or flickering light.

Loud noises.

Changes in weather.

Strong scents.

Allergic reactions.

Caffeine withdrawal – for example, if you quit drinking coffee.

Stress.

A wide variety of drugs, including birth control pills.

Treatment options for migraines

There are two main ways to treat migraines:

1. When a migraine occurs: take medicine to help relieve symptoms and shorten the migraine.
2. Everyday: take pills daily to reduce how often migraines occur.

Other than medicine, there are other treatments you can try. Some people find that applying ice and/or pressure to the head and resting in a dark, quiet room can reduce the pain. Others find that alternative

practices such as acupuncture, relaxation therapy and hypnosis can help.

Some studies have looked at whether different vitamins and herbs can reduce migraine pain, but there is no proof yet that they work. Talk to your doctor or Registered Dietitian for more information before taking high doses of supplements.

Bottom line

Migraines can be painful and disrupt your daily activities since they are worse than common headaches. Some people can avoid migraines by knowing their triggers, like aged cheese, chocolate or alcohol. If you suffer from migraines, take note of what you eat and drink before the start of your migraine. It may help you avoid migraines in the future.