

Ask the Pharmacist

What are migraine headaches and how can I treat them?

A migraine headache is a special kind of headache that can last for hours to days. Migraines can cause intense pain as well as other symptoms, such as feeling sick to your stomach or having changes in your vision.

The exact cause of migraines is not known. Migraines may be related to a problem with the blood flow in your brain or they may happen when brain chemicals don't stay balanced. Migraine headaches tend to run in families and often are triggered by specific things. Common migraine triggers include:

- stress
- tiredness
- changes in the weather
- certain foods, such as red wine, cheese, or chocolate
- monosodium glutamate (MSG) or food preservatives, such as nitrates
- bright lights

Migraines affect women three times more often than men and often occur during, or right before, a woman's menstrual period. They may also happen when a woman is taking hormone pills.

Before a migraine starts, there is often a warning period when you don't feel well. Some people lose part of their vision or see bright spots or zigzag patterns in front of their eyes. These symptoms, which may precede and predict a migraine headache, are called migraine aura. The vision changes

of the aura usually go away as the headache begins. Many people with migraines do not have these visual symptoms.

Migraine symptoms may also include:

- throbbing or pounding headache
- extreme sensitivity to light and noise
- nausea and vomiting

The pain is usually more severe on one side of the head but can affect the whole head.

Sometimes a migraine can cause symptoms such as numbness or even weakness. However, these can also be symptoms of a stroke. If you have these other symptoms along with problems with your vision, do not assume a migraine is the cause. Call your physician right away.

Treating migraines

Your physician may prescribe medicine that you can take as soon as you start having symptoms of a migraine. This medicine will help keep headaches from becoming severe once they start. Medicines used for this purpose include:

- Pain relievers such as acetaminophen (for example, *Tylenol*[®]), nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (naproxen, brand name *Aleve*[®]) and aspirin-acetaminophen-caffeine (brand name *Excedrin*[®] *Migraine*)

- Triptans such as eletriptan (*Relpax*®), rizatriptan (*Maxalt*®, *Maxalt-MLT*®), sumatriptan (*Imitrex*®) and others. Triptans are available as tablets, an injection, and a nasal spray. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has issued a public health advisory about potential risks of taking triptans together with SSRI and SNRI antidepressants. If you're taking these antidepressants, talk to your doctor before taking triptans.
- Ergot medicines such as ergotamine (brand name *Ergomar*®), dihydroergotamine (brand name *D.H.E. 45*®), ergonovine (generic only, no brands), and methysergide (brand name *Sansert*®). Ergotamines should not be taken with triptans. If you are taking an ergot drug, make sure to follow your doctor's instructions on when and how often to take it. Overuse of ergot medicines can lead to rebound headaches, which are a type of chronic headache resulting from overuse of pain medications.
- Another type of migraine medication, known as "preventive medicines" are used to treat very frequent (more than two times a week) or very debilitating migraines. They include beta-blockers, calcium channel blockers, antidepressants, and some seizure medicines. These medications are not used to treat headaches after they begin. For these medicines to work, you will need to take them daily, even when you

don't have a headache and you may have to take them daily for a few months.

- All of the above medications have side effects, so talk to your doctor about which treatment is best for you.

Here are some steps you can take to treat your migraine. When a migraine begins:

- Take the medicine recommended or prescribed by your physician.
- Rest in a quiet, dark room until the symptoms are gone. Putting a cool, moist washcloth on your forehead might help.
- Avoid driving a car.

If you take medication to prevent or treat migraines, a Neurology (having to do with the nervous system) Pharmacist from the Medco pharmacy can help. Neurology Pharmacists are specifically trained in the medications used to treat migraines. These pharmacists, available 24/7, can answer any questions you have about the medications you're taking for preventing or treating migraines. Neurology Pharmacists can also review your medication history with you and suggest ways you could save money on your prescriptions. For more information on Neurology Pharmacists, call the number on your prescription drug ID card or visit www.medcospecialists.com. For more information about migraines, visit www.medco.com/health.

References:

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