

# Where do migraines come from?

Good question. Nobody knows exactly what causes migraines. But we do have a good idea of what can set one off and what happens when it does.

For many years, scientists believed that migraines were linked to expanding and tightening blood vessels on the brain's surface. But they now believe they're caused by a "pain center" or generator in the brain. A migraine begins when over-active nerve cells send out messages to the blood vessels, causing them to clamp down then expand. That's where the familiar pounding, pulsing headache comes from.

## Causes are unknown, but triggers are well-known

Some people may get a migraine every few days. Others get one only once or twice a year. Migraine "triggers" vary from person to person.

- **Stress** is one of the most common triggers. Migraine sufferers are generally very sensitive to stressful events.
- **Certain foods and drinks**, such as aged cheese, alcohol, nitrates (in hot dogs and processed meats) and monosodium glutamate (MSG) commonly found in Chinese food, may trigger up to 30% of migraines.
- **Too much caffeine** or cutting out caffeine too fast can trigger a migraine attack.
- **Weather conditions** (storm fronts, changes in barometric pressure and strong winds) or changes in altitude can cause a migraine.
- **Unbalanced hormone levels** – for example, during menstruation, pregnancy or menopause – can trigger a migraine. In fact, about 3 in 4 women who suffer from migraines say that their attacks follow their menstrual cycle.
- **Skipping meals** can make your blood sugar rise and fall and cause an attack.
- **Lack of sleep** or changes in your normal sleep pattern can cause problems, too.

To help prevent migraine attacks, you must first figure out which triggers affect you. Keeping a headache diary (see sidebar) is an effective way to track your triggers. A diary will also help you talk to your doctor about your condition.

## How to seek treatment

Start with your doctor. Discuss your doctor's experience and how he or she diagnoses and treats headaches. Depending on your symptoms and other physical conditions, your doctor may refer you to a headache specialist.



Information for this article was found in WebMD's Migraines & Headaches Health Center at [webmd.com](http://webmd.com) and The National Headache Foundation at [headaches.org](http://headaches.org).

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## Keeping a headache diary

Getting to know your migraine patterns and triggers will help you feel "in control." Note when your headaches start, how long they last and what, if anything, provides relief. Write down how you respond to headache medications. Also list the foods you ate in the 24 hours before a migraine attack, any unusual stress in your life and what you're doing when the headache strikes. Be organized, specific, direct and ready to talk about these details with your doctor.