



Migraines: not just a regular headache

Migraines are more than just bad headaches — they are a sign of problems with your nervous system.¹

People who get migraines usually have strong, throbbing pain on one side of their head. Most people feel the pain in their temples or behind their eye or ear. Migraines can also cause upset stomach, vomiting and sensitivity to light and sound. They can cause some people to see spots or flashing lights.²

Migraines can happen any time of day, though they often start in the morning. The pain can last anywhere from a few hours to a few days. You can get them once or twice a week or once or twice a year.³

What causes migraines?

For many years, scientists thought that migraines were caused by the blood vessels in your head expanding and contracting. Now they believe that they might have a genetic cause.⁴

Although no one knows for sure why migraines happen, they do have a pattern:

- They most often happen to people between the ages of 15 and 55.
- Most people who get them have a family history of migraines.
- They are more common in women.
- They often become less severe as you get older.⁵

Can you stop migraines?

Although migraines may seem to happen without warning, you can control them by using “headache hygiene.” This means taking care of yourself so that you lower your risk of an attack. Headache hygiene takes two simple steps: changing your lifestyle and avoiding your triggers.⁶

Lifestyle changes

- Get enough sleep. Go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day.
- Exercise regularly. At least 30 minutes three times a week.
- Don't skip meals. Start your day with a healthy breakfast.
- Lower your stress. Some people find it helpful to take stress breaks every day.⁷

Avoid common triggers

- A change in your sleep pattern: getting too much or too little sleep
- Certain foods: aged cheese, red wine, processed meat
- Extreme heat or cold
- Going out in the sunlight without sunglasses
- Breathing in smog, perfume or chemicals
- Looking at a TV or computer screen, or bright flashing lights⁸

How to treat migraines

Migraines have no cure, but they can be managed with your doctor's help. Your doctor may prescribe drugs that can stop a migraine that has already started, reduce the pain or help prevent an attack. If you feel a headache coming on, treating it right away may help make it less severe. Some things to try: drinking plenty of water; resting in a dark room; and placing a cool washcloth on your forehead.⁹

To help you and your doctor pinpoint your triggers, start a headache diary. Some things you should track include:

- Date and time your headache started
- How long the migraine lasted
- How severe the headache was
- What you were doing before the migraine
- What you ate and drank before the migraine¹⁰

Getting to know your migraine patterns and triggers may help you feel more in control of them. Your doctor may want to run tests to rule out other problems that could be serious.



To find out more, go to:

Headache and Migraine pages on MedlinePlus, medlineplus.gov

National Institute for Neurological Disorders, nind.nih.gov

National Headache Foundation, headaches.org

American Headache Society, achenet.org

Visit anthem.com for more ways to get healthy – and stay healthy.



¹ MedicineNet website, Migraine Symptoms (December 2011): [medicinenet.com](https://www.medicinenet.com).

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health website, Migraine Fact Sheet (December 2011): [womenshealth.gov](https://www.womenshealth.gov).

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health website, Migraine Fact Sheet (December 2011): [womenshealth.gov](https://www.womenshealth.gov).

⁴ National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke website, NINDS Migraine Information Page (December 2011): [ninds.nih.gov](https://www.ninds.nih.gov).

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health website, Migraine Fact Sheet (December 2011): [womenshealth.gov](https://www.womenshealth.gov).

⁶ American Headache Society website, Headache Hygiene – What Is It? (December 2011): [achenet.org](https://www.achenet.org).

⁷ American Headache Society website, Headache Hygiene – What Is It? (December 2011): [achenet.org](https://www.achenet.org).

⁸ American Headache Society website, Headache Hygiene – What Is It? (December 2011): [achenet.org](https://www.achenet.org).

⁹ National Center for Biotechnology Information website, Migraine (December 2011): [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).

¹⁰ National Center for Biotechnology Information website, Migraine (December 2011): [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).