

What is a Migraine Headache?

Migraine is a chronic neurological disorder usually characterized by moderate to severe headaches. Typically the headache affects one half of the head, is pulsating in nature, and lasts from 2 to 72 hours. Other symptoms may also include nausea, vomiting, and sensitivity to light, sound, or smell.

The pain is generally made worse by physical activity. Sometimes patients suffering with migraine headaches perceive an “aura”: a transient visual, sensory, language, or motor disturbance which signals that the headache will soon occur. Occasionally an aura can occur with little or no headache following it.



Migraines are believed to be due to a mixture of environmental and genetic factors. About two-thirds of cases run in families. Changing hormone levels may also play a role, as migraines affect slightly more boys than girls before puberty, but about two to three times more women than men. The risk of migraines usually decreases during pregnancy. The exact mechanisms of migraine are not known. It is, however, believed to be a neurovascular disorder.

What are the Symptoms of Migraine Headaches?

- **Prodrome:** A variety of warnings can come before a migraine. These may consist of a change in mood (for example, feeling "high," irritable, or depressed) or a subtle change of sensation (for example, a funny taste or smell). Fatigue and muscle tension are also common.
- **Aura:** This is commonly a visual disturbance that precedes the headache phase. Some migraine sufferers develop blind spots (called scotomas); see geometric patterns or flashing, colorful lights; or lose vision on one side.
- **Headache:** Although migraine pain usually appears on one side of the head, 30%-40% of migraines occur on both sides. Throbbing pain may be present. More than 80% of migraineurs feel nauseated, and some vomit. About 70% become sensitive to light (photophobia) and sound (phonophobia). This phase may last 4-72 hours.
- **Headache termination:** If untreated, the pain usually goes away with sleep, but medication and various pain protocols can shorten the duration and lessen the pain of a migraine.
- **Postdrome:** Other signs of the migraine (for example, inability to eat, problems with concentration, or fatigue) may linger after the pain has disappeared.

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