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The Complete Guide to Migraine Headaches

PREVENTION, TREATMENT AND REMEDIES

By Alice Peart

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Table of Contents

Please Read This FIRST.	2
Terms of Use	2
Disclaimer	2
Table of Contents	4
1. Migraine headaches - An Overview	8
What Causes a Migraine?	8
<i>Time for a Migraine</i>	9
Combating a Migraine	9
<i>The Mechanism Behind A Migraine</i>	9
<i>Stress on the Muscles</i>	10
2. What are migraine headaches?	12
What Happens During Migraine Headaches?	12
Causes of a Migraine	12
3. Types of Migraine Headaches	14
<i>Classification of a Migraine</i>	14
<i>A Migraine with Aura</i>	14
<i>Types of Migraines with Aura</i>	15
<i>Migraines without an Aura</i>	15
4. What is A Migraine?	16
Diagnosis of a Migraine.....	16
Causes	16
<i>Accompanying Symptoms</i>	17
Remedies	17
5. Signs and Symptoms of Typical Migraine headaches	18
Warning Signs.....	19
6. Factors That Trigger Migraine Headaches	21
7. What is the Real Cause of Migraine Headaches?	25
How Does it Happen?	25
<i>Other Factors</i>	26

8. Risk Factors 27

 Major Risk Factors..... 27

9. Who Gets Migraine Headaches? 29

10. Migraine Headaches in Children..... 31

 Causes 31

 Symptoms..... 32

Preventive Measures 33

Treatments..... 33

11. Recent Research on Migraine Headaches 34

 Recent Research Findings..... 34

Implantable Neurotransmitter..... 34

12. How to Diagnosis Migraine Headaches 36

Scans and Tests..... 38

 CT scans 38

 MRI scans 38

 Lumbar Puncture or Spinal Tap 38

 Sinus X-Ray 38

 Neurological and Ophthalmology Tests..... 39

 Skeletal Tests 39

Other Factors 40

 Orthodontic Care 40

 Chronic Neck and Shoulder Pain 40

13. Ten Tips to Avoid Migraine Headaches 42

14. Migraine Headaches and Sleep Apnea..... 45

15. Natural Remedies to Prevent or Ease Migraine Headaches..... 46

16. Treating Migraine Headaches with Acupressure 47

17. Treating Migraine Headaches with Massage Therapy 49

18. Treating Migraine Headaches with Detoxification..... 50

19. Treating Migraine Headaches with Herbs 51

20. Treating Migraine Headaches with Acupuncture 52

21. Treating Migraine Headaches with Biofeedback..... 53

22. Treating Migraine Headaches with Exercise 54

23. Treating Migraine Headaches with Vitamins and Supplements 55

24. Treating Migraine Headaches with Traditional Chinese Medicine..... 57

25. Treating Migraine Headaches with Homeopathy 58

26. Treating Migraine Headaches with Craniosacral Therapy..... 60

27. Treating Migraine Headaches with Cognitive Therapy 61

28. Treating Migraine Headaches with Energy Healing 62

29. Treating Migraine Headaches with Ayurveda..... 63

30. Treating Migraine Headaches with Environment and Lifestyle Changes 64

 Environmental Changes..... 64

 Lifestyle Changes 64

31. Treating Migraine Headaches During Pregnancy 65

32. Herbs for Aromatherapy to Treat Migraine Headaches 66

33. Herbs for Cleansing Teas to Treat Migraine Headaches 67

34. Relieving Your Stress Triggers..... 68

35. Avoiding Foods that Trigger Migraine Headaches 69

36. Treating Migraine Headaches with Relaxation Techniques 70

37. Relieving Caffeine Headaches 71

38. Can You Use Feverfew for Migraine Relief? 72

39. Treatment Options for Migraine Headaches..... 73

40. The Impact of Migraine Headaches 77

41. How to Cope with Migraine Headaches 80

42. Myths and Misinformation about Migraine Headaches 82

43. Common Mistakes in Treating Migraine Headaches..... 83

44. When to Seek Professional Help 85

45. How Do I Choose a Doctor for Headache Care? 86

Part-I: Introduction

1. Migraine headaches - An Overview

Migraine headaches are severe headaches which can happen suddenly. They have distinct symptoms, such as tingling in the leg (or arm) or blind spots or flashes of light across your eyes.

You then become very sensitive to light, which is called Photophobia, and sound, which is called Phonophobia. You also feel nauseated or actually vomit.

Migraine headaches may prevail for few hours or few days. The pain is intense.

Migraine headaches are a common ailment among more than 28 million Americans. Another interesting statistic is more women suffer from migraines than men do. 8% of men and 25% of women suffer from a migraine at some or other time of their lives.

A migraine is a vascular headache as it is due to compression of arteries and their effects on veins. You may feel pain either on one side of the head or all over your head.

'Migraine' comes from the Greek word, hemikranion, which means pain affecting one side of the head.

What Causes a Migraine?

There is no single cause for a migraine. Contributing factors could include:

intake of alcohol

certain specific food items

the menstrual cycle in women

weather changes

bright light, and

some genetic factors.

A migraine could lead to certain psychological problems, strokes and depression. This is because of the narrowing of the blood vessels in the brain and head which lowers the flow of blood to the brain and results in intense headaches and pain.

Time for a Migraine

Migraine headaches commonly occur between the ages of ten and forty-six. Inherited genetic factors causing a migraine are due to skeletal imbalances. Normally, your doctor conducts a detailed investigation into your family history to analyze possible causes of your migraine.

Those suffering from sinus problems also suffer from severe headaches, albeit different from a migraine. A thorough examination by a neurologist with an MRI and a CT scan can clear all doubts of your headache being due to sinus, brain tumor, or seizures.

Combating a Migraine

The main aim of any migraine treatment is to lessen and eliminate the pain. This should also reduce the vomiting and nausea symptoms. Doctors recommend an array of treatment methods and intake of various NSAIDs like Tylenol, Advil, or Excedrin or other drugs like Topamax, Imitrex and some others.

However, none of these drugs can provide long-term relief from migraine headaches.

A migraine is a neurological disease. There are many new medications available. Although they may not offer a total relief, they can reduce the frequency of occurrence of a migraine. Again, they can stop the pain sooner after your migraine headache starts.

The Mechanism Behind A Migraine

Migraine headaches come from excessive pressure on the temporalis muscle and trigeminal nerve. These are the primary centers for the cause of your migraine

headache. It results due to excessive and abnormal muscular activity leading to a change in the blood flow and electrochemistry within your head. Normally, you associate headaches or an attack of a migraine to a very stressful day.

Normal headaches find relief in simple medications. However, migraine sufferers do not find any relief from such medications.

Various dental problems are often the cause for your migraine. Crooked teeth and disjoined jaws lead to excessive clenching and grinding. Abnormal functioning of these muscles triggers abnormal blood flow. Lack of sufficient blood supply causes headaches which persist.

Such intense contraction of muscles leads to chronic headaches. The pain is more intense due to overuse and overexertion of muscles. Eventually, it can lead to joint damage. Then, your muscles try to increase activity to make up for the damage, leading to more pain.

This vicious cycle continues and you suffer from a migraine.

Stress on the Muscles

Muscular stress causes migraines. Normally, you do not compress or grind your teeth. However, in stressful situations, you clench your teeth together hard. Even a slight touch of the teeth needs excellent coordination between the temporalis and masseter muscles. Coordinated contraction of these muscles helps you put your teeth together comfortably.

However, continued contraction of these muscles leads to muscular dysfunction. You may suffer from this dysfunction but may not notice until the resultant problem crops up later in life.

This is because of the wear and tear of the joint with age and time. As the jaw and muscles lose their ability to function, surrounding muscular tissue also go into a dysfunctional mode. This triggers your migraine headache.

This constant tension of the jaw and associated nerves damage the health and working of the associated nerves. Facial nerves bear the brunt of the problem leading to cramps, nausea, and oversensitivity to light and sound. It could also lead to spasms, lack of deep sleep, and other neurological problems. You may feel as if your body is burning.

These symptoms are due to accelerated working of the sympathetic nervous system of your body. They cannot maintain the balance in your body. Efficient and coordinated functioning of all body parts suffer, which causes pain in all the muscles of the body.

Because of this, you feel tired, irritated, angry, and depressed. It takes a lot of time for the hyper-activated sympathetic nervous system to regain its balance and resume normal functioning. Migraine headache treatments try to bring it into balance sooner and thus relieve you of your migraine headache.

Part-II: Understanding migraine headaches

2. What are migraine headaches?

A migraine is a neurological disease and a type of vascular headache. A migraine occurs due to changes in the vascular body system and also affects the muscular tissues too. The main characteristics of migraine headaches are severe pain on either one side or both sides of the head, extreme sensitivity to light and sound, nausea, vomiting and an upset stomach.

There are many different types of headaches. Each could cause severe pain and discomfort. Therefore, only a careful and correct diagnosis of the symptoms can classify your headache in the migraine category or not. Such clear classification helps in prescribing proper treatment and better relief from the pain.

What Happens During Migraine Headaches?

If you have a bout of migraine, you can feel severe pain in either one or both sides of your head and, additionally, around the temples or behind an ear or eye.

Normally, a migraine attack starts in the morning but it can occur at other times of the day. The pain can last for a few hours to many days. You can become very sensitive to light and sound. You also can suffer from nausea, vomiting and an upset stomach - or all three at once.

Causes of a Migraine

You cannot allocate any single reason for the cause for your migraine headache. Such attacks could be due to excessive noise or very bright lights, lack of sufficient sleep or food, anxiety, stress, environmental changes, or intake of alcohol, and nicotine, certain foods like chocolate or others foods containing additives. Women also suffer migraine bouts due to hormonal changes during their menstrual cycles.

There are two main forms of a migraine - classic and common migraine. However, it is helpful to keep a headache diary and note down the time, where

you were when it began and what you were doing when your migraine started. This could prove helpful to your doctor to analyze the type of your migraine so your doctor can suggest suitable medications.

3. Types of Migraine Headaches

There are many different types of migraine headaches. All these headaches have the same basic migraine features with some differences in their symptoms, intensity, and occurrence.

A migraine is a slow starter but soon becomes a steady and nagging pain. The intensity increases with time. You feel a throbbing and reverberating pain at the temples, near your eyes and ears. All types of migraines cause nausea, vomiting, and extreme sensitivity to light and sound.

Classification of a Migraine

There are two broad classifications of a migraine:

1. A migraine with aura, which is a **classic migraine** and
2. A migraine without aura, which is a **common migraine**

A Migraine with Aura

With these, you experience an aura or certain indicators that may point towards the coming onslaught of the headache. Those indicators occur due to the combination of different neurological symptoms before the particular migraine. You could see flashing lights, have blind spots in an eye or both the eyes, view wavy and jagged lines, experience certain hallucinations, disturbances in your hearing, or even feel strange odors and a change your senses of taste and smell.

You may become numb to feelings of touch and go blank, without able to recollect the correct words you are about to speak. These neurological events can occur around an hour before the start of the migraine headaches and go away once the migraine pain starts.

Types of Migraines with Aura

Hemiplegics migraine: This is a rare but severe type of migraine. It is normally hereditary. It starts with a temporary paralysis, or similar sensory disturbances on one side of the body, and develops into severe headache within an hour.

However, your paralysis and other neurological disturbances vanish with the arrival of your headache.

Ophthalmoplegic migraine: This severe, and rare, migraine causes pain around the eyeball with paralysis of the surrounding muscles. The symptoms last for a few days or months. However, immediate medical attention is necessary to relieve pressure on the nerves surrounding the eye.

Retinal migraine: This migraine is very rare and begins with a temporary and partial or complete loss of sight in an eye. Your eye aches and the pain spreads to other parts of the head too.

Basilar Artery migraine: This rare form of a migraine may come in bouts. You experience confusion, dizziness, ringing in the ears, vomiting or speaking problems. This migraine occurs due to hormonal imbalances and is common with young women and girls.

Abdominal migraine: This migraine pain attacks your abdominal region. You experience vomiting, nausea, and diarrhea. Pain and associated symptoms occur for many hours.

Migraines without an Aura

This is a vascular headache and occurs due to the constriction of blood vessels in and around the skull. Migraine pain is due to inflammation of blood vessels. There could be two or more such headaches every month, though it varies from person to person. Some last for few days while some last for a few hours. Such headaches can start at any time of the day or night but they do not wake you from your sleep.

4. What is A Migraine?

A chronic migraine is a migraine that occurs for a fortnight or more every month. It does not occur due to an overdose of medications or painkillers and discontinuance of a medication won't lessen it. It may be due to changes in parts of your brain but there is no clear medical research to support this theory.

Diagnosis of a Migraine

Doctors conduct thorough physical and neurological examinations and review your medical history and background. Some headaches could be due to certain irregularities in your skull or brain. Imaging techniques like MRI and CT scans can reveal these abnormalities. But, if there are no revelations in your scans and you still suffer from severe headaches, doctors may diagnose a migraine.

Causes

A migraine can start and end at any time. There can be a total cessation of the headache altogether too. You cannot pinpoint any particular cause for your migraine. Doctors advise you to maintain a regular chronological journal of your lifestyle patterns, food intake, and other activities to show up possible causes.

A few possible causes are:

- Irregular and insufficient sleep patterns
- Strong perfumes, air fresheners or incense sticks
- Insufficient intake of healthy food
- Long and stressful driving
- Prolonged viewing of television or exposure to computers
- Excessive stress
- Alcoholic beverages

- Not enough water

If you are able to link any of these causes with your migraine, take remedial steps to alter your lifestyle patterns and get relief from this terrible and excruciating pain.

Accompanying Symptoms

A migraine causes severe head pain. Nausea and vomiting accompany it. It becomes difficult, or even impossible, to bear the slightest sound or light. You feel the pain passing through your entire body and almost destabilizing your virtual existence. In short, a migraine seems like physical torture.

Remedies

Doctors prescribe certain anti-seizure medications, antidepressants or cardiovascular drugs as medications for different people's migraines. However, none of those offer total relief for your migraine.

You can choose from a wide choice of medications, natural remedies, pain management techniques, therapies and other methods of relief. However, migraine intensity differs from person to person and the effectiveness of the remedies also differs.

There is no permanent and sure relief for a migraine. Nevertheless, you may be able to control the onset, frequency and occurrence of some migraines.

- Reduce your stress levels at your workplace and home
- Develop a certain relaxing regimen, according to your tastes.
- Opt for soothing background music, meditation, relaxed bath, yoga, or
- Set aside a quiet place for you alone.

These techniques relax your nervous system and may keep a migraine at bay.

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