

# **Migraine Headaches**

## **How do I know if I have a migraine?**

You probably have migraines if your headaches come with two or more of these symptoms: nausea, light sensitivity, and problems doing usual activities.

## **Will I need x-rays, an MRI/CT, or laboratory tests?**

For most people x-rays, MRI/CT and laboratory tests are not needed to diagnose headaches. Your doctor will order these tests only if a less common specific cause for headache is suspected.

## **Are there different kinds of migraines?**

Migraines often start with a warning sign called an aura, lasting 15 to 30 minutes. During an aura, you may see flashing lights and colours, or have other changes in your vision. Many migraines do not start with an aura. They may start more slowly than migraines with aura and last longer. With both types of migraine, the pain may be on one or both sides of your head.

## **How long do migraines usually last?**

Migraines may last for only a few hours or up to three days. They may happen only once or twice a year, or as often as daily. Migraines are different for each person.

## **What things may “trigger” a migraine?**

In some people, certain things can set off a migraine, such as changes in weather, stress, missing meals, lack of sleep, menstrual periods, the birth control pill, certain foods or alcohol. It is often useful to keep a diary of your headaches to help identify your triggers. In some people, some foods can also trigger migraines, such as aged, canned, cured or processed meats or foods, such as bologna, pepperoni, hot dogs, and aged cheese; alcoholic beverages, especially red wine; aspartame (some brand names: NutraSweet™ and Equal™); too much caffeine; meat tenderizer or monosodium glutamate (MSG); chocolate, cocoa, and carob; nuts and peanut butter.

## **How are migraines treated?**

A few things might help you feel better: lying down in a dark, quiet room; putting a cold, damp cloth over your forehead; massaging your scalp using a lot of pressure or putting pressure on your temples.

There are two types of medicines for migraines: some to help get rid of the pain and others to prevent headaches from happening. To treat the pain of a migraine, you can try over-the-counter medicines like acetaminophen (Tylenol®) and ibuprofen or naproxen (Advil®, Motrin® or Aleve®). These medications should be used as soon as the aura occurs or the headache starts. If they are not helpful, your healthcare provider may prescribe medicines called triptans. If one triptan does not work very well for you, another may work better. Seven different triptans are available in Canada. Narcotics may occasionally be necessary but are best avoided.

If your headaches occur more than two or three times a month and interfere with your daily life, you may discuss medication to prevent migraines from occurring with your healthcare provider. Preventive medications need to be taken *every day* and include beta blockers, such as metoprolol and propranolol; antidepressant medications, such as amitriptyline; and anti-seizure medications, such as topiramate. Some herbal medications, such as butterbur; and supplements, such as riboflavin, coenzyme Q10, and magnesium have also been shown to be helpful in some people. You may need to try several to find the right one for you.