

# UniversityHealthServices

*We heal. We educate. We care.*

## **MIGRAINE HEADACHE**

*Migraine is a neurological disorder that is characterized by recurrent attacks of headache, with pain most often occurring on one side of the head, accompanied by various combinations of symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and sensitivity to light and sound.*

### **Symptoms**

The migraine can occur at any time of day or night, but occurs most frequently on arising in the morning. These episodes can last from several hours to several days and are often disabling. Routine activity or slight head movement typically makes the pain worse. During the attack, the pain may migrate from one part of the head to another, and may radiate down the neck into the shoulder. Scalp tenderness occurs in the majority of patients during or after an attack.

Migraine is often hereditary, so if you have migraines, chances are another family member does as well. Migraines affect 26 million Americans and can strike anyone at any age, but are most common in young adult women.

Following a migraine attack, many individuals feel tired, washed out, irritable, listless, or have impaired concentration. Although migraine is not curable, it is manageable with motivation and proper medical care. Fortunately, a variety of therapies and medications can help. Some lessen or relieve the symptoms of migraine, while others reduce the frequency and duration of migraine attacks. The more you understand about migraine and its treatment, the better you can control its impact on your physical well-being.

### **Common Characteristics**

- A moderate to severe headache that lasts from 4 to 72 hours
- Pain is often, but not always, on one side of the head and throbbing
- Pain is aggravated by movement or physical activity
- Pain is often associated with nausea (and when severe, vomiting), sensitivity to light, sounds, and odors

### **Causes**

It is believed that migraine is caused by changes in the neurotransmitters and blood vessels in the brain, but exactly what causes these changes is still a subject for research and debate. However certain factors have been identified which can trigger attacks in susceptible people:

- Stress (or sometimes the relief of stress)
- Lack of food or infrequent meals
- Certain foods, including products containing monosodium glutamate, caffeine and tyramine
- Overtiredness (physical or mental)
- Change in sleep patterns (weekend schedule changes or shift work)
- Hormonal factors (monthly menstrual periods, the contraceptive pill, Hormone Replacement Therapy or menopause)
- Extreme emotions (anger or grief)
- Physical activity
- Environmental factors (loud noise, bright or flickering lights, strong perfumes, hot and stuffy atmosphere, etc.)
- Climactic conditions (strong winds, extreme heat or cold)

For most people there is not just one trigger, but a combination of factors which individually can be tolerated, but when they all occur together a threshold is passed and an attack is triggered.

Although it can be helpful to identify and avoid your own personal trigger factors, it is important not to become too obsessive. Everyone has the capacity to suffer from migraine but in some people, most probably because of a

genetic predisposition, the threshold at which attacks occur is lower. It has been proven that there is no "migraine type" and sufferers are not, as is sometimes suggested, neurotic, perfectionist hypochondriacs. Although twice as many women as men suffer from migraine because of the involvement of hormonal factors, migraineurs come from all walks of life, areas of the world, ethnic groups, and social classes.

### **Diagnosis**

There is no medical test that can specifically diagnose migraine. Migraine can only be diagnosed by effectively communicating your symptoms to your clinician. Extensive blood testing, brain scanning (CT or MRI) and spinal tap are only needed in special situations.

### **Migraine Management**

Your health care provider can help you formulate a management program that includes identification of triggers and prescribing of medication with instructions on their proper use.

### **Other Types of Headaches**

#### **Tension Headaches**

Tension-type headaches are the most common type of headache. 68% of men and 88% of women have had episodes of tension-type headaches. Tension-type headaches involve a mild to moderate steady pain, tightness, or pressure around the head and neck. They may be provoked by stress, eye strain, or poor posture. When tension headaches occur on a daily or almost daily basis, they are termed chronic daily headaches. Often other symptoms are associated with these headaches, including fatigue, sleep disturbances, and depression. Tension-type headaches and migraine headaches can occur together.

#### **Cluster Headaches**

Cluster headaches consist of attacks of excruciating, stabbing pain on one side of the head that often localizes behind an eye. Cluster headaches, unlike migraine or tension-type headaches, are more common in men than women. Attacks occur nearly every day or several times a day for weeks or months, and then may disappear for months or even years. Attacks usually last anywhere from 15 minutes to 3 hours and often occur during the night. Related symptoms include eye-tearing or redness, a runny or stuffy nose, or facial sweating, which occur on the side of the face where the pain is felt.

#### **Please Read:**

If you develop new, prolonged, or more severe symptoms of this problem, call the UHS advice nurse at 863-4463 (available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week) or consult your personal clinician. In an emergency, go to Mt. Nittany Medical Center Emergency Department or call 911 for an ambulance.

#### **Test Results and Advice Nurse**

Please call the nurse for test results and advice: 863-4463

#### **Appointments**

Appointments can be made in person or by phone. If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call and cancel. Otherwise you will be charged for the visit.

To schedule or cancel appointments, call: 863-0774

**For more information about health care issues, visit the UHS Web site at [www.sa.psu.edu/uhs](http://www.sa.psu.edu/uhs)**

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

