



Health Tips

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with

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Health Tip: Oh, my aching head. Part 2. Migraine and "Thunderclap" headaches

Few conditions in medicine are thought to be as incapacitating as **migraine headaches**. If you are one of the 28 million Americans who experience migraines, you know the symptoms well--- a throbbing, usually one-sided headache, nausea and sometimes vomiting, and sensitivity to light and sound.



Another common feature of migraine headaches is the aura, a "warning sign" that sometimes precedes the headache. Aura symptoms include a temporary blind spot, blurred vision, seeing stars or zigzag lines, smelling strange smells, and numbness or tingling on one side of the face or body. It was

thought that changes in the brain's blood vessels---initially becoming constricted and then expanding---was responsible for causing migraines. More recently it has been discovered that imbalances in certain brain chemicals, such as serotonin, also play an important role. Prior to the onset of a migraine, serotonin levels drop and other chemicals called neuropeptides are released. When these neuropeptides reach the lining of the brain (meninges), the headache occurs.

Some migraine sufferers have specific triggers that can set off a migraine. While these vary from person to person, they include hormonal changes in women, certain foods (aged cheeses, chocolate, alcoholic beverages, monosodium glutamate and caffeine), stress, and sleep deprivation. Diagnosis of migraines can usually be made based on the history of certain characteristic symptoms. Sometimes special tests, such as a brain MRI or CT scan are needed to rule out a more serious underlying brain disorder. This is particularly true in new migraine patients or in those with aura symptoms that mimic a stroke.

While there is no cure for migraine headaches, there are a number of treatments available. In some migraine sufferers, making lifestyle changes, such as avoiding red wine, stopping smoking or getting adequate sleep will stop them altogether. Medications are available to treat symptoms after they develop or to prevent the headache from occurring in the first place. Medications for migraine pain include acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and opiate containing pain killers. "Abortive" medications are taken at the first sign of a migraine in order to stop the headache or other migraine symptoms early in their course. These medications include a class of drugs known as "triptans", as well as ergot-containing drugs. Triptan medications, which have become one of the most

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commonly used treatments for migraines, include sumatriptan (Imitrex), rizatriptan (Maxalt), zolmitriptan (Zomig), and eletriptan (Relpax).

Medications are also available to prevent migraine headaches. These "prophylactic" medications include beta blockers, calcium-channel blockers, tricyclic antidepressants, and anticonvulsants.



Of the five types of headaches discussed in this review, the most serious are known as thunderclap headaches. As the name implies, these headaches strike like a boom of thunder. Often described as the worst headache ever experienced, the pain strikes suddenly and severely. The list of causes for these is equally ominous---bulging or rupture of a blood vessel in the brain, infection such as meningitis or encephalitis, and blockage of flow of spinal fluid. In some cases, however, no specific cause is determined. Along with the headache, there may be other symptoms, including nausea, vomiting,

visual changes, weakness, numbness and changes in level of awareness.

Fortunately, this type of headache is uncommon, but should they occur, medical attention should be sought immediately, since they can be a warning sign of a life-threatening condition. Evaluation of this type of headache usually includes special tests or studies such as CT scan of the brain, spinal tap, and in some cases angiography to visualize the blood vessels in the brain. Treatment of this type of headache depends on the underlying cause. In some cases, as with a bleeding aneurysm in the brain, surgery may even be necessary.

Headaches are one of the most commonly experienced medical problems. So common, in fact, that people frequently do not seek medical attention for them. With severe or recurrent headaches, however, a visit to the doctor is warranted. Once the specific type of headache is known, a determination of possible treatments or preventive measures can also be made.

Are you or someone in your family dealing with headaches?

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