



What is a migraine?

Almost everyone gets a headache now and then. The most common form of headache is the tension headache. This is usually easily treated with rest and relaxation.



Migraine is not just a bad headache. Migraine is a biological disorder of the central nervous system which is often inherited from a family member. The head pain of migraine is often felt on one side of the head only, although it can switch sides, and less commonly can affect both sides at once. Along with throbbing pain in the head, symptoms such as nausea, vomiting and sensitivity to light and sound stop migraine sufferers from carrying out their normal activities during an attack. More than three million Canadians (17% of the population) suffer from migraine. Both adults and children can suffer as can people from all walks of life and of all cultures and races. Migraine attacks can occur as infrequently as a couple of times a year, or almost every day .

There are two main types of migraine -- migraine with aura, and migraine without aura. Approximately 20% of migraine sufferers can experience aura, which is the term for the warning sign of the head pain to come. This may be as flashes of light or pattern of colour before the eyes, blurred vision, or a partial loss of sight that spreads across the visual field. Others may feel a tingling or numbness in the hands and around the mouth as part of their aura. These symptoms go away usually within one hour as they give way to the full blown migraine attack. But it is possible also to have the aura and not the pain that follows, particularly in older people.

A Migraine is diagnosed by doctors based on the patient's symptoms. Since you will probably see the doctor for diagnosis when you are headache-free, it is important to be clear when describing the symptoms of your attack. Although the symptoms will vary slightly from person to person, migraine without aura, the most common form of migraine, includes a combination of the following symptoms:

- throbbing head pain which worsens with physical movement, usually one-sided
- nausea
- vomiting
- sensitivity to light
- sensitivity to sound
- sensitivity to smell

It is not necessary to have all these symptoms. The symptoms may be moderate or severe and still be migraine. Attacks last 4 to 72 hours if not treated or if unsuccessfully treated. Many people also experience more subtle symptoms with their migraine attacks. These may be experienced prior to as well as during an attack. They can include dizziness, yawning, trembling, food cravings, over -- talkativeness or trouble with words, swelling or numbness in the extremities, pallor, and alteration in mood (both unusually down or unusually up).

There are a variety of more rare forms of migraine. It is possible to have the stomach discomfort of migraine without having a headache. This is known as abdominal migraine, and is more common in children with migraine. Others can suffer from forms of migraine that mimic the symptoms of temporary stroke or confusion.

What causes migraine is still in the hands of scientific researchers. The pain itself is caused by swollen blood vessels in the head, which are affected by chemical changes in the body. As a migraine sufferer your priority is to see a doctor for proper diagnosis, and then learn how to control your pain. The Migraine Association of Canada can help you to find information, common migraine triggers, and available treatment options. But be sure to work closely with qualified practitioners to be sure you have the very best advice.