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Health Really Matters™

MIGRAINE Part 1

Migraine-sufferers have a lot of company. Three million Canadians suffer from migraine headaches



The history of migraines goes away back to Babylon in 3000 BC and has been mentioned in the Ebers Papyrus in 1200 BC. Even Hippocrates described the symptoms in 460 BC. In those days, all trouble with the body stemmed from the digestive tract, which supposedly sent “vapours” from the stomach to the head, causing the pain.

It's amazing that even today, the cause of the migraine headache is still not totally understood. For many years, the cause was thought to be due to a spasm in the blood vessels of the brain causing a constriction causing reduced blood flow. Then when the constriction ceases, the blood vessels dilate causing pain. This theory is now thought to work together with the serotonin theory. Serotonin is an important brain chemical and the varying levels of this chemical cause alternate contraction and dilation of the blood vessels, which trigger a migraine attack. The word “trigger” is important here (See sidebar on page 2).

Phases of a migraine headache :

A typical migraine headache passes through four phases of varying lengths, although some people may not experience the aura or prodromal phases.

Phase 1: The Prodrome (pre-headache) phase: This phase consists of a collection of symptoms that foretell a migraine is coming. Symptoms include fatigue, hunger (even a craving for one food), nervousness, stiff muscles (often in the neck) and intestinal disorders like constipation or diarrhea.

Phase 2: The Aura: As the name implies, there can be visual effects like black and white flashes of light, blurry or distorted sight. The aura may affect other senses as well like hearing and taste. Not all migraine headaches are preceded by an aura but if it does occur, it lasts about 30 minutes or so. This is a good time to start treatment.

Phase 3: The headache (the pain phase): This phase can last 24 to 72 hours. Pain can start in one half of the head but it can spread to the other side. Light is the enemy in this phase and people usually retire to a quiet, darkened room. Besides pain, there can be blurry vision, chills, sweating, tenderness of the scalp and stiffness of the neck.

Phase 4: Prodromal or resolution phase: The pain is gone but there can be a lingering scalp tenderness where the pain was centred as well as extreme exhaustion. Sometimes there can be a hung over feeling. Although some people experience feeling refreshed and elated at this time, others feel depressed and generally exhausted.

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Causes or “triggers” of migraines:

Stress: This is the cause of so many medical problems. It could be due to work pressures, unresolved conflicts, death in the family and many other stresses of everyday life.

Stimulation of the senses: Sometimes bright, fluorescent lights, flickering TV or computer screen can induce a migraine attack. Strong odours or even loud noises can act as a trigger.

Barometric pressure changes: Sometimes a change in the weather (extreme cold or heat) or even going to a higher altitude may be a trigger. A strong trigger in some people is high humidity and low temperature. Also those warm Chinook winds can be a trigger for some. It could be that the cause is the negative ions found in these winds. About one-half of migraineurs say that weather changes trigger their migraines.

Changes in sleep patterns: Insomnia can be related to morning migraines. So getting a good night's sleep is important.

Fasting or missing meals can be a trigger: Also, withdrawing from alcohol or caffeine and dehydration can cause migraines.

Lifestyle choices: smoking, intense exercise (including sexual activity)

Estrogen: This female hormone has been linked to migraines. There is a bright spot for women who get migraine headaches. It seems that women who get migraine headaches have a one-third lower risk of getting breast cancer. Hormone levels play a part here.

Dietary causes: Historically, the big migraine food no-nos were chocolate, aged cheese, beer, red wine, nitrate or nitrite-containing foods (cured meats), aspartame (artificial sweetener), avocados, onions, peapods, raisins, sauerkraut, MSG. Although it is difficult to prove that these foods are triggers, there is a lot of anecdotal evidence that says they do. So if these are part of your diet, try omitting them.

KEEP A DIARY.

It is sometimes difficult to identify your migraine triggers. Keeping a headache diary is a good way to find out. The diary should list the following: time and date the headache started; duration; what food and drink you consumed that day; any physical or emotional stresses you are under recently; how you have been sleeping; fatigue levels; and women should note where they are in their menstrual cycle. It is also a good idea to note what therapy you instituted yourself and how well it worked.

The diary will help you to know what foods or drink to avoid and it will help your doctor in the choice of treatment. Look for patterns of activity and foods, which seem to precede the headache.

The importance of self-education can't be underestimated. Information abounds and is available from the Internet, your doctor, pharmacist, library and experiences from others with migraines. By documenting your experiences with migraines, you will go a long way toward getting control of your migraines. Migraines cannot be cured but they surely can be controlled.

RISK FACTORS FOR MIGRAINES

Just being a woman is a risk factor. Two-thirds of migraine-sufferers are women. Hormone fluctuations have a lot to do with this. Migraines sometimes occur just before or just after menstruation. Many pregnant women with migraines find that the headaches lessen later in pregnancy while they worsen in the first trimester. Women who take birth control pills or hormone replacement therapy (HRT) may find they get more migraines than those who do not take the hormones.

Heredity can affect whether you get migraines or not. Migraines tend to run in families and if one or both your parents had migraines, chances are good that you will get them too.

DO CHILDREN GET MIGRAINES?

About 5% of elementary school children get migraine headaches. This number can rise to 20% in those in secondary schools. The symptoms and triggers are similar to those that adults experience. Young children will verbalize the problem by complaining about the feeling that their heart is pounding in their head, feeling they want to throw up, a feeling of being inside a big drum and just want to go to a darkened room and lie down. When you hear those kinds of comments, it's probably a migraine and a doctor should be consulted.

In the Health Really Matters article, Migraine Part 2, there is a discussion about the treatment of migraines.