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MIGRAINE Part 2

In this second part on migraine headaches, you'll learn about the various treatments available.



Non-drug treatment: It's very important that migraineurs (migraine sufferers) educate themselves about all aspects of migraine headaches. One of the first things to do is to identify the triggers that may be causing your headaches. Using your migraine diary that lists the foods you eat, how you slept, the headache occurrences, time of onset and completion and other data, you may be able to determine what lifestyle habits are triggering your migraines. You may find that omitting certain foods from your diet may reduce the number of migraines.

When physical and emotional stress is a trigger, there are yoga, tai chi and other courses available to soothe the body and mind. Also, getting more exercise like walking briskly a few blocks every day can help. If you are a woman and are taking hormones, discuss with your doctor the possibility of reducing doses or trying an alternative. Your Medicine Centre pharmacists have information about this as well.

Drug Treatment

There are two forms of treatment for migraines. One is abortive therapy designed to stop the headache outright or at the very least reduce the pain significantly. These drugs are taken at the beginning of a headache before it gets too far. It is usually taken when the headache is in the aura stage. (See stages of migraines in Migraine-1 article).

Over-the-counter medications: Acetaminophen can be of some help. ASA with caffeine (sometimes with codeine added). Ibuprofen is another drug that is available without prescription in a strength of 200mg per tablet.

PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS FOR MIGRAINES:

NSAIDs (Non Steroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs): Besides ibuprofen (in higher strengths), others in this group include diclofenac, naproxen and many more. These drugs reduce pain and inflammation and can be effective in treating migraine pain.

Triptans: Back in the mid-1990s, a new class of drugs, the triptans, specifically designed for migraine headaches was released. Sumatriptan (Imitrex®) was the first of these. Others in this class include naratriptan (Amerge®), zolmitriptan (Zolmig®) and rizatriptan (Maxalt®). These drugs work by narrowing the blood vessels in the brain that have become dilated and edematous. When taken correctly, these medications can often stop a migraine in progress. As with most medications, there are side effects, which our pharmacists will apprise you of when you receive your first prescription.

Ergot Derivatives like ergotamine is an older class of drugs, which is used to stop a headache. Since the discovery of the triptans, the use of this group has lessened.

Barbiturate combinations: Used to be a mainstay of migraine treatment. They combined ASA, butalbital, caffeine and codeine in varying formulations. This is one product that can be overused resulting in more headaches.

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ALTERNATE MEDICINE FOR MIGRAINES:

HERBAL - FEVERFEW

Some people say feverfew helps reduce the frequency and intensity of migraines. It may have to be taken daily for two months before positive results are seen. Although the efficacy of feverfew isn't totally proven, some migraineurs say it is worth a try before starting other medications. As usual, keep your doctor informed about any alternate products you are taking. Some herbals do interact with other drugs so it's good to have the herbs included on your treatment list on your chart.

ACUPUNCTURE

There is some evidence that acupuncture may help reduce the number of headaches. Although, not suggested routinely, it would be worth a try.

MASSAGE THERAPY

The muscles in the neck, head and back often become very stiff and painful during and after a migraine attack. Massage therapy can help reduce the tightness in the muscles and reduce physical tension. Some people who have had massage treatments say they can sleep better, too. Since sleep problems is one of the triggers of migraines, this can be helpful.

BIOFEEDBACK THERAPY

This is a type of therapy where you use your mind to control your body. With proper training, you can learn to control some body functions like muscle tension, skin temperature, brain activity, heart rate and even blood pressure. It has a proven track record in helping to reduce stress. Some people choose this route of therapy to be able to rely less on medications. It may also be helpful in those for whom medications haven't worked that well.

DRUGS TO PREVENT MIGRAINES:

The second type of migraine treatment is preventive therapy. The goal of this type of treatment is to reduce the frequency and severity of migraine attacks as well as the need for other medications, like the triptans, to treat it. Preventive therapy is started in those who have migraines often (for example, two per week lasting a couple of days). This therapy is also considered when the attacks are so debilitating, they interfere with the activities of daily life.

Some examples of drug classes used for prevention are:

- **Beta-blockers** (propranolol, atenolol, metoprolol) and calcium channel blockers (verapamil, diltiazem) are cardiovascular drugs used to treat high blood pressure and coronary artery disease. But they can have a positive effect in reducing migraine frequency. Some side effects include dizziness, light-headedness, drowsiness, fatigue or weight-gain.
- **Anticonvulsants** (valproate, gabapentin) These are anti-seizure drugs used to treat epilepsy but are also used to prevent migraine headaches. Some gastrointestinal side effects of nausea, diarrhea and cramping can occur as well as dizziness.
- **Tricyclic antidepressants** (amitriptyline, nortriptyline). These have an effect on the serotonin levels in the brain. Even if you aren't suffering from depression, these drugs may help prevent migraine attacks.

These medications need to be taken every day for best effect. Each class has some side effects so a good balance must be struck between positive effects and side effects. Part of the job of our Medicine Centre pharmacists is to inform their customers about any side effects that may occur when taking any new medication. The good thing about this preventive group of drugs is that if the first drug doesn't work for you and your headaches, changing to another may be the answer.

Botox injections have also been used to prevent migraine attacks. Although results are not always certain and cost is high, it is sometimes used if other methods fail.

SUMMARY:

Migraines are responsible for much absenteeism and decreased work productivity as well as a reduced quality of life. It is important to gather as much information about migraines as you can. With a good understanding of the problem, the right medications and knowing how to take them, migraineurs can control their headaches and live a normal life.