

Understanding Migraines

Migraine headaches are not like other headaches. These painful, throbbing headaches usually affect only the right or the left side of the head. They typically also cause nausea or vomiting, and sensitivity to light and noise. About 30 out of 100 people who have migraines can predict when they are about to have one, because they have an “aura.” An aura is a symptom or group of symptoms, such as seeing wavy lines, blind spots, or flashing lights, that happen just before a migraine.

If you’ve had migraines, you know how much they can take out of you. You know, too, that it’s impossible to work or even move while you are having one. Any activity seems to worsen the pain. Luckily, there are medications to both prevent and treat migraines. Plus, there are even ways to avoid getting the dreaded headaches in the first place.

For some people, over-the-counter painkillers, such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen, are enough to stop a migraine that has already started. Other people need prescription medications specifically for treating migraines. Examples of these drugs include sumatriptan, zolmitriptan, and ergotamine. If nausea and vomiting are severe, doctors can also prescribe drugs to combat those symptoms. People who tend to get frequent or severe migraines sometimes take daily medications to prevent them – before they start. “Preventive” medications include blood-pressure lowering drugs, antidepressants, and drugs used to prevent seizures.

Even though they are useful, drugs are not always needed to prevent migraines. If they pay close attention, people can sometimes spot the triggers that bring on their migraines and then learn to avoid them.

The most common avoidable migraine triggers include:

- Sleeping too much or too little;
- Skipping meals; and
- Consuming too much or too little caffeine. (If you normally use caffeine and you have less than your usual amount or skip it altogether, that can bring on a migraine.)

The following foods and food ingredients can also trigger migraines:

- Chocolate;
- Red wine and port;
- Aspartame (an artificial sweetener);
- Monosodium glutamate (MSG), a food additive often found in Chinese food;
- Nitrates, often found in cured meats such as hot dogs and cold cuts; and
- Tyramines, which are found in pickled or marinated foods, aged cheeses, or yeast.

If you have migraines, try keeping a “headache diary.” In the diary, jot down what you did or ate during the few hours before the migraine hit. If you do this for long enough, you might begin to see a pattern. If you tend to get headaches after sleeping too much, you’ll know you need to keep a regular sleeping schedule. And if certain foods seem to promote the headaches, you may decide to cut them out of your diet.

Health Coaches Can Help

To learn more about migraine headaches and options for managing them, call a Health Coach. Health Coaches are specially trained healthcare professionals, such as nurses, dietitians, and respiratory therapists. They are available by phone, anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, at no charge to you.

To talk to a Health Coach, call [1-800-658-2750](tel:1-800-658-2750). You can also get information online at www.thedialogcenter.com/bcbsnd.