

### Now that is a Headache!

Almost everyone has had a headache at one time or another. Research shows that 28 million Americans experience migraines, with women experiencing them 3 times more than men. A migraine is an intense throbbing pain to one or both sides of the head. It is believed that migraines involve different pathways of the brain and the chemicals are altered by showing a decrease in serotonin and magnesium, with the release of neuropeptides resulting as an irritation to the brain's outer covering; the blood vessels then dilate, and the outcome is pain.

Some people may experience what is referred to as a 'predromal' which are sensations experienced hours or days before the headache begins. Or a person can experience an aura, which is a precursor showing as a neurological symptom such as one seeing blind spots, flashes of light, having tingling in an arm or leg or trouble with speech. If a person experiences an aura then a headache usually starts 15 to 30 minutes after the aura. Migraines left untreated can last from hours to days in length and are disabling. The pain can be dull or severe in intensity. The after effects of a migraine can leave a person feeling mentally cloudy, with neck pain, feeling very tired or experience sensitivity to noise or light. Some other sensations are intense energy, cravings for sweets, thirst, depression or irritability.

Each individual might have a different trigger that precipitates a migraine. Such triggers are:

- Foods such as cheese, alcohol, aspartame, caffeine, MSG are just to name a few.
- It also should be noted that skipping meals or fasting can trigger the start of a migraine.
- Stress can also play a factor.
- Bright lights, sun glare, scents or perfumes along with flowers can elicit a migraine.
- Hormonal changes with fluctuations in estrogen and progesterone can trigger a headache.

- Familial history of migraines in the family can precipitate headaches along with changes in the environment and consumption of certain medications.

It is important that if you are experiencing headaches that they be diagnosed by a physician. This can be done by CT, MRI and taking a thorough history from the patient. It is beneficial if you are experiencing headaches that you keep a journal including when your headache starts, what you are doing at the time, how long it lasts, are there auras and what does the pain feel like. This will help the physician in their diagnosis and treatment for you.

There is no cure for a migraine but there are medication options along with some self help measures to help in treatment. Over the counter medications that can be used include Advil, Motrin, Aleve, and Excedrin Extra Strength. It should be noted though that these medications can possibly lead to bleeding of the stomach along with the development of ulcers, and also a increased risk for heart attack or stroke. That is why it is very important to consult your health care provider. Other prescription medications that have been used to treat migraines include:

- Triptans that include Imitrex, Maxalt, Amerge, Zomig, Axert, Frova, or Relpax. These medications bind to the serotonin receptors thus causing blood vessels to constrict and help the pain.
- Ergots such as Ergomar, or Migranal. These help to reduce pain but have more side effects.
- Anti nausea medications such as Compazine, Phenergan, or Vistaril. These combat the nausea effects from the migraines.
- Cardiovascular beta blockers such as Inderal, Calan, Prinivil, or Atacand. These medications are used to prevent migraines but the actions are not understood.
- Anti seizure drugs such as Depakote, Depakene, or Topamax. These medications have been used in prevention of migraines, but do have some side effects. The actions are not clearly understood as why they work.

- Antidepressants, including amitriptyline - Pamelor or Vivactil. The newer antidepressants don't seem to work as well as the older drugs do in the prevention of migraines. These are believed to help in controlling the serotonin level.

There are various self help measures you can do on your own, such as:

- Rest in a quiet, darkened room.
- Drink fluids to help prevent dehydration.
- Use a very cold cloth or ice pack to put at the back of the head but make sure it is wrapped in a cloth so not to damage the skin with direct coldness.
- In prevention, avoid triggers, be sure to exercise and get adequate sleep. Above all quit smoking if you have that habit.

Seek medical help immediately if you experience a new severe headache like you have never had before. If you experience a stiff neck, fever, confusion, double vision, have trouble speaking, or have a headache after a head injury then seek medical help promptly.

If you suffer from migraines, you have my sympathy. They are extremely painful. Hopefully you can treat them effectively. As always, if you have any questions or comments, eMail me at [gheffelmire@dearborncounty.in.gov](mailto:gheffelmire@dearborncounty.in.gov)