

JUNE: HEADACHE AWARENESS

Migraines

Migraines are severe headaches that often include nausea and sensitivity to light, sound, and smell. Besides blinding, throbbing head pain, other symptoms may include seeing spots or flashing lights or a temporary loss of vision. A migraine is a medical condition that can occur at any time of day, though it most often occurs during the morning hours. Although, there is no specific time limit, a migraine may last from one or two hours to up to two days. Even though migraines in most cases are not considered life threatening, they can be very debilitating and interfere with daily activities. (1)

Who gets migraines? This condition affects approximately 30 million Americans. (2) Boys experience more migraines than girls prior to puberty. However, after age 11, girls begin to experience the majority of migraine headaches. The increase in the incidence of migraines in girls over boys continues to rise until adulthood when women experience migraine headaches 3 to 1 over men. (3)

Why do so many more women than men suffer from migraine headaches? While it is improbable that sex hormones can completely explain the difference, there is significant evidence that there may be a connection between migraines and fluctuations in estrogen levels in women. The problem appears to be the response of the central nervous system to normal hormonal fluctuations. Women often experience their first migraine headache during their teen years, most occurring with the onset of menstruation. The highest incidence of migraine occurs in women around the age of 40. Fortunately for most women, aging and menopause often reduces the frequency of migraines. (3)

Causes of Migraines

There is no known exact cause of a migraine headache. Migraines were once thought to be caused primarily by constriction and dilation of blood vessels. Research has also shown that there is a genetic link to migraines. Now, thanks to various neuroimaging techniques, researchers at UCLA have shown that migraines may begin as a problem of brain excitability - dramatic waves of activity that spread across the surface of the brain - called cortical spreading depression (CSD). CSD may in turn trigger not only the pain of migraine but the visual symptoms, nausea, dizziness and difficulty concentrating so common in migraine patients. Researchers suggest that women may have a faster trigger than men for activating the waves of brain activity thought to underlie migraines. If the theory is correct, this triggering mechanism may be a new target for migraine treatment. (4)

Triggers

Every person who has migraines has individual triggers which consist of a variety of factors and events that may or may not lead to a migraine. These triggers include: lack of or too much sleep, skipped meals, bright lights, loud noises, strong odors, stress and anxiety or relaxation after stress, weather changes, alcohol (often red wine), caffeine, hormonal changes during the menstrual cycle, foods that contain nitrates (such as lunch meats and hot dogs), MSG (a flavor

enhancer found in fast foods, broths, seasonings, and spices), tryamine (such as cheese soy products, hard sausages, smoked fish, fava beans and Chianti wine), and aspartame (NutraSweet® and Equal®). (1)

Migraine Management

Migraines have no cure but can be managed with medications and lifestyle changes. The most important preventive measure is to take time for yourself and find healthy ways to deal with stress. In addition:

- eat healthy foods and do not skip meals
- be active (at least 30 minutes most days of the week is best)
- limit alcohol and caffeine intake
- do relaxation exercises
- get enough sleep

If you think you get migraine headaches, talk with your doctor. Together, you will find ways to avoid triggers and treat symptoms when they happen as well as ways to help make your migraine less frequent and severe.

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Resources

- (1) womenshealth.gov: <http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/migraine.cfm#a>
- (2) National Headache Foundation
http://www.headaches.org/education/Headache_Topic_Sheets/Migraine
- (3) National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS), NIH, HHS.
<http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/migraine/migraine.htm>.
- (4) University of California - Los Angeles (2007, August 8). Why Women Get More Migraines Than Men. ScienceDaily. Retrieved June 16, 2010, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com>