

Health & Wellness Corner

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Understanding the Difference Between Migraines and Headaches



Almost everyone has had a headache at one time or another, but there's a big difference between garden-variety headaches and migraines. It's important to know what you're dealing with so you can seek the proper pain relief.

The difference between a migraine and a headache

A migraine is a specific type of headache:

- **Migraine** – a recurring, moderately severe headache with throbbing or pulsing pain that's often on one side of your head. The pain can be moderate to severe and it can include other symptoms like nausea, weakness, sensitivity to light and noise and an aura — a sensory disturbance such as seeing bright or flashing lights or feeling tingling on one side of your body.

- **Headache** – pain that varies widely in severity and duration and stems from many different causes. If a cold or flu causes it, it will subside once you're over the illness. But it may last longer if it's due to a head injury, eye strain, sinus congestion or an underlying medical condition. Sensitivity to certain foods, food additives, medicines or something in your environment can also cause headaches.

If you have a severe headache or you have headaches regularly, you should talk to your doctor. Once the cause is identified, your doctor can develop a treatment plan to help prevent the headaches and relieve pain when they do occur.

What causes migraines?

If you suffer from migraines, you know they can be devastating. The symptoms can bring your life to a standstill. The World Health Organization classifies severe migraines among the most disabling illnesses, comparing them to dementia, quadriplegia and psychosis. Migraines aren't uncommon: They're the third most common disease worldwide.

Researchers think migraines have a genetic cause. Most people who have migraines have someone in their family who also experiences them. Anyone can have a migraine, but women and people who have epilepsy, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and sleep disorders have a higher risk of migraines.

Migraines are usually brought on by changes in your daily routine or certain triggers, such as:

- **Emotional** – stress or anxiety
- **Environmental** – high altitude, weather changes, strong smells or loud noises
- **Visual** – bright or flashing lights, glare or looking at a computer screen or TV for an extended period
- **Physical** – hormonal changes in women, too much physical activity, too much or too little sleep, dehydration or hunger
- **Foods and additives** – cheeses, caffeine, processed foods, yeast, fermented foods, MSG, chocolate and other foods
- **Substances** – alcohol, medicines and tobacco

In some instances, people notice symptoms a day before a migraine occurs. Some of these symptoms can include food cravings, mood changes, tiredness or increased fluid retention or urination.

Living with migraines

There's no cure for migraines. Treatment focuses on preventing them and relieving pain when they do occur. Your treatment may include medicines, dietary supplements or modifications, lifestyle changes or a combination of these. There are also things you can do to help prevent them, such as:

- Losing weight if you're overweight
- Practicing stress management strategies, such as biofeedback, yoga and other relaxation techniques

- Working with a cognitive behavioral therapist if you have anxiety, depression or another mental health condition

When a migraine hits, sit and take a rest in a dark, quiet room with a cold cloth or ice pack on your head — this can also help relieve other types of headaches. Also, drink plenty of water. Keep a diary of when migraines happen so you can identify what's triggering them. When you know what triggers your migraines, you can eliminate them from your lifestyle and take better control of your health.

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