



Although there is no cure for migraine, it is a manageable condition. It is not only possible to ease the pain but also to prevent and reduce attacks...

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Managing Migraines

'It usually starts with zig zag lights and I can't see very well. Then the pain kicks in. It feels like a tingling, stabbing pain over an eye or on either side of my temples,' describes Sue Jackson.

Sue, 37, is one of an estimated six million Britons, who suffer from migraine. The condition is often inherited and occurs mostly in people aged 20 to 50 years. Often migraine patients have suffered their first attack as a teenager and two thirds of migraineurs are women.

Not just a headache

A migraine is more severe and debilitating than a normal headache. An attack can last between four hours and three days and often comes with additional symptoms. The 'common migraine' is usually accompanied by nausea or diarrhoea, sensitivity to smells, sounds and light, and intense throbbing pain, which often affects one side of the head only. People who suffer from 'migraines with aura' experience neurological disturbances such as blind spots, flashing lights or zig zag patterns. These visual disturbances occur before the headache kicks in and last between 15 minutes and one hour. Some people only experience the aura without other symptoms.

According to the Migraine Action Association (MAA), the average number of attacks is 13 migraines per year. But some

people endure four attacks per month or more.

Cause unknown

During a migraine attack, serotonin is released from its storage sites into the bloodstream, where it causes changes to the neurotransmitters and blood vessels in the brain. The arteries that supply the brain constrict and swell, resulting in migraines. What causes the release of serotonin into the bloodstream is still unknown.

Triggers

Although there is no single cure, migraine is treatable. Sufferers can identify certain triggers that start off their migraines. Finding these triggers is like detective work. Whilst some don't cause harm individually, a combination of them can cause an attack. The MAA recommends writing down in a diary what you eat and drink during the day, your activities, unusual events, emotions, the attacks, their duration and severity. The diary also helps you in recognising warning signs that an attack is on its way, so you can take immediate action.

Trial and error

Sue Jackson has been suffering from both common migraine and migraine with aura since she was 17. To begin with, she would only suffer one bad attack in a year, but in her early thirties the attacks increased dramatically. She eventually had to give up her job as a customer service manager and change career. It took Sue 18 months to identify her triggers and find the right treatment. She tried exclusion diets and noticed that her triggers included caffeine withdrawal, visits to the hairdresser, perfume, hot weather, overheated rooms and lack of sleep. She has adjusted her lifestyle accordingly. These days, an average migraine lasts between three and twelve hours about once a week. Severe attacks lasting three days only occur once every six months. As soon as Sue recognises her warning signs, which include loss of concentration, feeling sleepy and clumsiness, she takes 600mg of Paracetamol and an anti-sickness drug to abort or at least shorten the attack. She has also found sweets to be helpful for her. 'You need to be

How to prevent migraines

- Find out your triggers and warning signs, by keeping a diary of your attacks.
- Try to avoid the triggers and take action immediately when you feel an attack is on its way.
- Eat regularly to keep your blood sugar levels stable.
- Drink at least two litres of water a day.
- Sleep regularly: don't lie in or go to bed too late.
- Get some fresh air and exercise every day.
- Make your working environment as comfortable as possible and take regular breaks.
- Practice relaxation techniques.

extremely patient with yourself. The worst thing you can do is get worried about your migraines,' recommends Sue. 'You have to become an expert in your own condition.'

Available treatments

Ann Turner, Director of the Migraine Action Association is herself a sufferer. 'Migraine is a very individual condition,' she says. 'A treatment which works well for one person may not help another. So it is a case of persevering with trying different treatments or combinations of treatments until you find one that suits you.' While some patients can successfully ease their pain with over the counter painkillers, others might need to turn to stronger medications prescribed by their GPs. So called 5HT agonists, also known as triptans such as Imigran or Maxalt have proved to be very effective. But these drugs can only work if taken at the early stages of an attack and their side effects can be quite severe. 'If you are taking acute treatments to treat migraine on more than 15 days a month you should consult your GP to discuss other options', recommends Turner. Preventative drugs prescribed by GPs include Beta-blockers and antidepressants, which patients need to take daily. These treatments take a while to show any benefit but they can reduce the frequency and severity of the attacks. The downside is that they also come with severe side effects such as drowsiness, nausea or extreme tiredness. Some patients might prefer alternatives such as Feverfew, St. John's Wort, Magnesium or Butterbur as a preventative treatment instead. Check with your GP if it interferes with other medication.

Six ways to ease the pain

- Take painkillers at the first warning sign of an attack before gastric stasis commences.
- If feeling sick take anti-sickness drugs such as Domperidone. These can make your stomach work again. Best taken together with your painkiller at the early stages of an attack.
- Massage peppermint or lavender oil into your neck and temples.
- Try to sleep it off in a cold, dark and quiet room.
- Some people respond more to heat, try using heat packs.
- Others respond better to cold. Cooling devices range from cooling eye masks, cold packs to adhesive cool gel sheets.

For more information:

Migraine Action Association (MAA)
www.migraine.org.uk
Phone: 01536 461333
The Migraine Handbook: The Definitive Guide to the Causes, Symptoms and Treatments, Jenny Lewis, Vermilion, £7.99 (written in collaboration with members of the MAA).