Managing Migraine Headaches

Migraines are painful, throbbing headaches that last from 4 to 72 hours. Migraine headaches may be so painful that sufferers are not able to do their usual activities. Migraine headaches affect 3 times more women than men.

An Unknown Cause

Experts are not sure what causes migraines. Migraines run in families, but it’s not clear why some people get migraines and others do not. The contraction and dilation of blood vessels that cause migraine headaches are thought to be caused by a release of chemicals in the brain due to certain factors or “triggers.” According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over 25 million Americans suffer from migraine headaches, and 9 out of 10 Americans have non-migraine headaches each year. Some sources cite higher numbers.

Migraines are costly to individuals, families, and companies. Whether sufferers stay at home or go to work, migraines are a largely unrecognized cause of lost workplace productivity, due to lost work time (including absenteeism, late arrival and leaving early) and impaired job performance. Some studies suggest that migraine sufferers lose four times as many hours of work productivity a week compared to infrequent headache sufferers. Others estimate an average 25% drop in productivity during migraine episodes when people stayed at work (International Headache Congress, 2009).

According to over 114,000 members who took the Highmark Wellness Profile in 2010, nearly 4% reported experiencing chronic pain (including migraines), costing an estimated $26,664,740 ($5,827 per person) in lost productivity (an average productivity impairment of 22%).

Know Your Triggers

You may be able to have fewer migraines by finding out what triggers your headaches and then avoiding those triggers. Triggers of migraines are different for each person, and may include changes in daily routine, foods, hormones, medicines, lights, odors, or other things in the environment. Some common migraine triggers are:

- Stress (either during a stressful time or right after stress subsides)
- Menstrual cycle in women, hormonal changes, or birth control pills
- Changes in your routine (i.e. how much you exercise or how much you sleep)
- Fasting, going too long without eating or skipping meals
- Changes in the weather, heat, or high humidity
- Bright lights, glare, or reflected sunlight
- Foods and additives/substances like chocolate, aged cheeses (tyramine), cured meats (nitrates), alcohol, caffeine, aspartame, or monosodium glutamate (MSG)
- Odors such as perfume, paint, dust, smoke, cleaning products, or certain flowers

Keep a HEADACHE DIARY to help you and your doctor identify your triggers. On your HEADACHE DIARY, write down WHEN you have a headache and HOW BAD it is, along with details such as WHAT YOU ATE and WHAT YOU DID before the headache started.
Know the Best Treatments for You
You can't cure migraines, but medicines and other treatments may help you feel better and limit how often you get migraines. Speak with your doctor about an over-the-counter pain medicine regimen that might be appropriate for you. It may take time to find what works best for you.

WHEN YOU FEEL A MIGRAINE COMING ON:

- **STOP** what you are doing, and take your medicine. Don’t wait for the migraine to get worse. Take your medicine exactly as your doctor advised.
- **REST** in a quiet, dark room. Close your eyes, and try to relax or go to sleep. Don’t watch TV or read. Put a cold pack or cool cloth on the painful area.

Be careful when you use your migraine medicines. Taking them too often can cause you to get another headache when you stop taking the medicine. This is called a **REBOUND HEADACHE**. If you are taking headache medicine more than 2 days a week, or if you get more than 3 headaches a month, talk to your doctor.

Know How to Prevent
Having a daily routine is one of the best ways to prevent migraines. For example, try to eat at the same times every day, and go to sleep at a regular time. Changes from your routine, such as skipping meals or staying up really late, could lead to a migraine. Triggers add up, so the fewer triggers you have at one time, the better your chance of preventing a migraine. That doesn't mean that you can't go outside if hot weather often triggers your migraines. But on a hot day, you might avoid red wine or cheese if those also are triggers for your headaches.

**REMEMBER THESE 6 STEPS TO HELP PREVENT MIGRAINES:**

1. Avoid your triggers.
2. Exercise regularly, moderately and consistently.
3. Eat regular, balanced meals and snacks of healthy foods.
4. Maintain consistent sleep and wake patterns.
5. Manage stress and anxiety.
6. Take your medications as directed by your doctor.

Resources That Can Help

- **CALL BLUES ON CALL℠.**
  As a Highmark member, you can work with a health coach to help you better manage your migraines and other chronic conditions. They will keep you up to date with the latest information, offer treatment plan guidance, and provide tools to help make managing your migraines a little easier. To contact a health coach, call the toll-free number on the back of your Highmark Member ID card (1-888-BLUE(2583)-428).

- **ENROLL IN AN ONLINE HEALTH PROGRAM OR CHECK OUT MEMBER DISCOUNTS.**
  Go to your Member website at [www.highmarkblueshield.com](http://www.highmarkblueshield.com), and follow the login instructions. Under the “Health Information Center,” click on “Managing Health Conditions” to review the “Health Condition Resources” available to you, including educational tools, articles and programs. While you’re logged on, click on “Your Coverage” and explore the “Member Discounts” link to see how you can save on weight management programs, fitness discounts, health coaching, over-the-counter medicines, and more.