

Your headache could be a migraine

Don't suffer in silence when your head feels like it's splitting open. Headache management specialist Dr K. Ravishankar helps you get a head start on dealing with the pain.

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What is migraine?

Migraine is the most common cause for headaches. It generally goes unrecognised, undiagnosed and untreated because there are myths and misunderstandings about headaches. Many patients don't know that better medication is available and at least some percentage of them put themselves needlessly through pain.

A migraine is an inherited vulnerability of the brain, influenced by various trigger factors, where there is a dilatation of blood vessels and a release of neuro-peptides, leading to transmission of pain signals to pain centres in the brain.

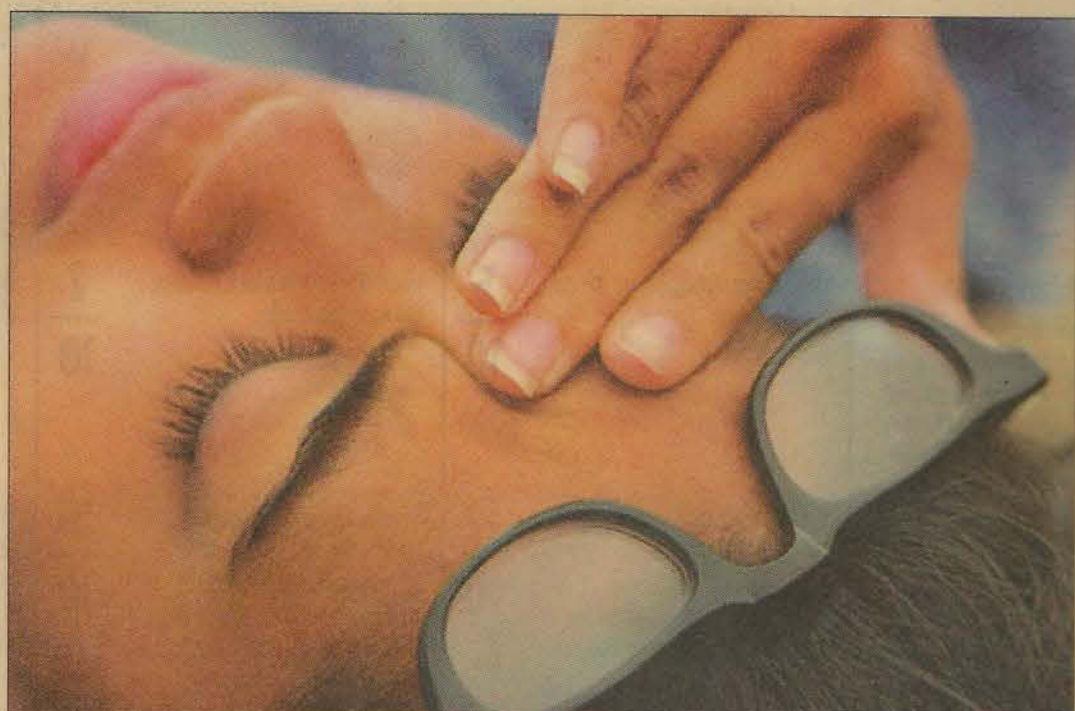
Myths and misconceptions about headaches

The most common misconception is that headaches are caused by an eye problem, like a refractive error, and that spectacles are the solution. However, headaches are largely not due to bad eyesight. The second is that sinus or a cold causes headaches. This is an over-emphasised diagnosis.

How can I tell if I have migraine?

Migraine is more common among women, particularly those with a family history of headaches. Migraines usually start at puberty, and may worsen during pregnancy, after delivery, with use of oral contraceptives, or during menopause.

The pattern varies among sufferers; no two headaches are the same and there can be a difference in severity across generations. If a patient does not receive treatment early enough, it will continue to worsen and become more difficult to treat.



A lot of migraines can be self-diagnosed. Here's what to look for:

- * Recurrent headaches, like more than two headaches a month.
- * Trigger links such as:
 - ◆ Skipping meals
 - ◆ Travel conditions
 - ◆ Fasting
 - ◆ Insufficient sleep
 - ◆ Emotional stress
 - ◆ Sunlight
- * Food can also be a trigger; migraine can be caused by Chinese food, chocolates, and cheese, among others.
- * Throbbing headaches that gradually increase in severity, which may or may not be accompanied by nausea, vomiting and intolerance to light and noise.

Is my headache a sign of a brain tumour?

Generally, people always suspect that their headaches have a serious cause (like a tumour), but it is important to realise that something that serious would probably account for less than five per cent of all cases. However, in every situation a doctor has to

rule out such possibilities — so get a CT or MRI scan done.

Treatment

A patient should seek treatment when migraine starts affecting their daily functioning. There is no diagnostic test; a doctor has to arrive at a diagnosis by assessing the clinical history of the patient. The first step is to exclude other underlying causes by asking the right questions to rule out eyestrain, ENT, neck and dental problems. Only when all these are eliminated, can one consider the possibility of migraine.

Your doctor will then prescribe medicines (daily or emergency medication) to reduce the frequency and severity of headaches. He will also help you identify and reduce triggers that cause them.

Preventive measures

Controlling triggers can help reduce migraines in certain cases. These include:

- * Avoiding fasting
- * Regular exercise
- * Yoga, relaxation techniques

Patient talk

I've suffered from migraine for the last seven to eight years. I've visited many doctors, but nothing has worked. When I get a migraine, the pain usually starts in the afternoon, goes on till evening or all night and sometimes even lasts till morning at a stretch. I also feel a constant pressure in my brain.

I try and avoid taking tablets, but have to take them sometimes to deal with the pain. I also use Axe brand universal oil to help me sleep.

MICHELLE VAZ
Works in insurance

MANY
patients undergo sub-optimal treatment and don't know that better medication is available.

Where to get help

The concept of a headache clinic was pioneered by Jaslok Hospital in 1994, followed by Lilavati Hospital in 1998. "Both clinics have seen a rise in the number of patients streaming in, thus indicating a rising prevalence, growing awareness and better relief from chronic headaches," says Dr Ravishankar. Jaslok: 56573333, Lilavati: 26421111.