

## **Migraines: One Big Headache**

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I visited an old friend who apologized for his unusual unkempt appearance and depressive mood. He explained to me that he suffered from migraine headaches, and after two days hunkered down in a dark, quiet room, he had just begun to feel human again.

Twenty-three million Americans know this feeling all too well. Few things are as debilitating as a migraine headache, and although my friend was male, women suffer migraines three times as often as men. The highest incidence is in women ages 25-35.

Migraines can either be “classic” or “common,” but what separates them from other kinds of headaches is the collection of symptoms that occur with the head pain. Eighty percent of these people experience what is known as the common migraine. Attacks can last four to 72 hours and include nausea and vomiting, sensitivity to light and sound, and sometimes pain that is aggravated by routine physical activity.

Pain is usually on one side of the head and is described as throbbing or pulsating. Many times, the pain is so severe it is “indescribable.” Most people find they want seclusion and find a dark, quiet room where they can try to relax and sleep.

More than 70 percent of patients give a family history of migraines, so clearly some genetic component exists. But although there are many theories, what triggers the chain of events is still yet to be understood.

My friend who suffers from migraine headaches has good reason to feel depressed due to the chronic nature of the affliction. But looking on the brighter side, medical science has come a long way in the last few years in discovering effective treatments that can help prevent flare-ups and help alleviate them when they occur.

Over time, most migraine sufferers discover certain things that seem to trigger their headaches. Lights, sounds, changes in humidity, alcohol consumption and even eating habits can bring on a dreaded attack. Keeping a headache diary may help one pinpoint these triggers.

If you have frequent and severe headaches, relaxation, acupuncture, or biofeedback techniques may work and improve the course of the headache dramatically. Both over-the-counter and prescription medications can actually work to block a predictable migraine. If you have what you think are migraines or any other frequent, disruptive headaches, you should see your health care provider for an evaluation.