What Is a Migraine Headache?
Migraine headaches (migraines) are severe headaches that can last from four hours to three days. They are common, especially in women. The cause of migraines is not clear. They are related to family history and lifestyle factors, including:

- Stress or anxiety
- Certain foods and drinks
- Hormonal changes
- Bright or flashing lights
- Lack of food or sleep
- Illness or certain medicines

What Are the Warning Signs of a Migraine Headache?
Signs of a migraine can start one or two days before the headache comes on. These may include constipation, feeling depressed and irritable, and food cravings. Once the migraine begins, symptoms can include:

- Throbbing pain on one or both sides of your head
- Feeling sensitive to light and sound
- Feeling sick to your stomach or vomiting
- Blurred vision and feeling lightheaded

Some migraines include an aura. An aura can cause you to see spots, flashes of light, or bright spots. Sometimes auras can include a “pins and needles” feeling in the arms or legs.

How Is a Migraine Headache Diagnosed?
Your doctor will review your symptoms, give a physical examination, and ask you questions about family history. This is usually all the information your doctor needs to diagnose migraines. If your examination shows something worrisome, your doctor may order imaging tests, such as an MRI or a CAT scan. These tests are expensive, risky, and rarely needed to diagnose migraines.

How Is a Migraine Headache Treated?
Based on your symptoms, you and your doctor will decide on a treatment plan. The plan will help you learn how to prevent migraines and how to feel better if you do get a migraine. You can help prevent and treat your migraines when you:

- Practice good sleep habits
- Avoid foods that trigger migraine symptoms, such as chocolate, certain cheeses, or alcohol
- Reduce stress
- Take over-the-counter pain medicine (such as naproxen, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen) as soon as you notice symptoms and lie down in a quiet, dark room
- Prescription medicines may be needed if over-the-counter medicines do not help. Avoid using medicines called opioids to treat pain from migraines. They are not as effective as other medicines and have serious risks.
Migraine Headache

Questions for My Doctor

• How can I change my lifestyle to help prevent migraines?
• Are there foods that I should avoid?
• What should I do when I feel a migraine coming on?
• What is the best medicine for migraines? Are there alternative therapies to treat migraines?
• Will I continue to get migraines for the rest of my life?
• My mom has migraines, too. Is that why I have them?

Bottom Line

• Migraines are severe headaches that can last from four hours to three days. They can be triggered by your environment.
• Signs of a migraine can begin days before it comes on. Symptoms include throbbing pain, feeling sick to your stomach, and sensitivity to light and sound.
• A migraine should be diagnosed based on your symptoms, physical examination, and health history. Other tests like a CAT scan or an MRI are rarely needed.
• Treatment focuses on preventing migraines by avoiding triggers and relieving symptoms when they occur. Lifestyle changes, like getting enough sleep, can help reduce how many migraines you get and how bad the symptoms are.

For More Information

• Choosing Wisely: http://consumerhealthchoices.org/headache
  http://consumerhealthchoices.org/migraine

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