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Health Really Matters™

MIGRAINE Part 1

Migraine-sufferers have a lot of company. Three million Canadians suffer from migraine headaches

The history of migraines goes away back to Babylon in 3000 BC and has been mentioned in the Ebers Papyrus in 1200 BC. Even Hippocrates described the symptoms in 460 BC. In those days, all trouble with the body stemmed from the digestive tract, which supposedly sent “vapours” from the stomach to the head, causing the pain.

It's amazing that even today, the cause of the migraine headache is still not totally understood. For many years, the cause was thought to be due to a spasm in the blood vessels of the brain causing a constriction causing reduced blood flow. Then when the constriction ceases, the blood vessels dilate causing pain. This theory is now thought to work together with the serotonin theory. Serotonin is an important brain chemical and the varying levels of this chemical cause alternate contraction and dilation of the blood vessels, which trigger a migraine attack. The word “trigger” is important here (See sidebar on page 2).



Phases of a migraine headache :

A typical migraine headache passes through four phases of varying lengths, although some people may not experience the aura or prodromal phases.

Phase 1: The Prodrome (pre-headache) phase: This phase consists of a collection of symptoms that foretell a migraine is coming. Symptoms include fatigue, hunger (even a craving for one food), nervousness, stiff muscles (often in the neck) and intestinal disorders like constipation or diarrhea.

Phase 2: The Aura: As the name implies, there can be visual effects like black and white flashes of light, blurry or distorted sight. The aura may affect other senses as well like hearing and taste. Not all migraine headaches are preceded by an aura but if it does occur, it lasts about 30 minutes or so. This is a good time to start treatment.

Phase 3: The headache (the pain phase): This phase can last 24 to 72 hours. Pain can start in one half of the head but it can spread to the other side. Light is the enemy in this phase and people usually retire to a quiet, darkened room. Besides pain, there can be blurry vision, chills, sweating, tenderness of the scalp and stiffness of the neck.

Phase 4: Prodromal or resolution phase: The pain is gone but there can be a lingering scalp tenderness where the pain was centred as well as extreme exhaustion. Sometimes there can be a hung over feeling. Although some people experience feeling refreshed and elated at this time, others feel depressed and generally exhausted.

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