



Migraine treatments— what you can expect

The treatment of migraine headaches has dramatically improved in the last decade. Taking drugs to relieve individual headache attacks is called “abortive therapy.” Standard over-the-counter products such as aspirin, acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), and combination drugs such as Excedrin can be used in this way to relieve headache pain. Prescription medications, known as the triptans (Amerge, Axert, Frova, Imitrex, Maxalt, Zomig), can relieve pain and associated symptoms such as nausea and sensitivity to light.

Other types of prescription drugs can be taken on a daily basis to help decrease migraine frequency; this is called preventive therapy. If you take pain medication frequently for migraines, consider asking your doctor whether adding preventive therapy would be appropriate.

No matter what you use for migraines, it is important to have realistic expectations about what the treatment can and cannot do.

Over-the-counter vs prescription drugs

Over-the-counter medications are a safe option for treating mild to moderate migraine pain. People with moderate to severe pain and associated symptoms, however, may need stronger prescription drugs.

Furthermore, using pain medication more than 2 days a week can lead to chronic daily headaches called analgesic rebound headaches. Although almost any migraine medication can cause this condition, it is especially common with over-the-counter and combination prescription drugs.

Don't wait to take your medication

It may take as long as 2 hours after swallowing your oral medication to obtain complete pain relief and return to normal. Prescription drugs that can be injected or inhaled may work more quickly.

Abortive therapy may not work at all if you wait too long to take your medications (say, until the pain becomes too severe to bear). It is best to take them as soon as you feel the migraine beginning.

Will the headaches stop completely?

No treatment can totally prevent migraines from recurring, especially since migraine is a chronic condition. The goal of preventive treatment is to reduce migraine frequency.

Can a specialist help?

If your migraine headaches do not respond to over-the-counter medications or prescription drugs, ask your doctor if he or she can refer you to a specialist who is experienced in the treatment of headaches.

Take care of yourself

Even if you have been prescribed a drug that consistently relieves your migraine pain, it is still important to take steps to prevent new headaches, such as avoiding common food triggers, keeping stress to a minimum, eating on a regular schedule, getting adequate rest, and exercising regularly.



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