

Is It Migraine? Symptoms, Triggers, and When to Seek Care

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Transcript

I'm Dr. Anthony Levinson from McMaster University. For many, a migraine is seen as just a bad headache, but it's actually a complex neurological disorder that affects 1 in 7 Canadians.

Migraine is often misunderstood or undiagnosed. If you have 2 out of the 3 following symptoms, it's likely a migraine:

- The pain is one-sided, often moderate to severe, and feels like a pulse.
- You feel sick to your stomach or may throw up.
- You're sensitive to light and sound and may feel the need to lie down in a quiet, dark room.

Migraine attacks often happen in four phases. It starts with the prodrome, where you might feel irritable or yawn frequently. About a quarter of people with migraine experience an aura — temporary changes like flashing lights, zigzags, tingling, or trouble finding words. These symptoms usually last 5 to 60 minutes and then go away completely. Then comes the attack, often a throbbing headache, sometimes on one side, with nausea and sensitivity to light or sound. Finally, the postdrome can leave you feeling drained or 'washed out' for up to a day.

In older adults, migraine can look different. Pain may occur on both sides of the head rather than one side. Nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light or sound may be less noticeable, and the aura may become more prominent, or there may be an aura without much or any headache.

To spot a possible headache emergency, remember SNOOP.

- S is for systemic symptoms, like fever, stiff neck, or unexplained weight loss.
- N is for neurological signs, such as confusion, seizures, trouble speaking, or reduced alertness.
- The first O is for onset — a headache that comes on suddenly and peaks within one minute.

- The second O is for older age — a new headache, or a major change in headaches, after age 50.
- P is for pattern change — especially a headache that is different from usual, or triggered by exercise, coughing, or straining.

These are red flags. If you notice any of them, get medical attention right away.

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