Know the Difference Between Migraine and Headache Symptoms

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Looking at Migraine vs Headache

“Wow, I have such a migraine right now!” It is a common misconception that a bad headache is a migraine. The reality is, a headache and migraine are different.

What Is a Headache?

Headaches range from mild to severe head pain. Aching and pressure on both sides of the head, forehead, temples and neck pain are common.

Over 150 different types of headaches can occur; the most well known types of headaches are cluster, sinus, and tension headaches. Stress and chronic daily headaches are the most common among adults and teens.

The least common type of headache is cluster headaches — they are often the most severe type. The pain can be constant with intense piercing, throbbing and burning pain throughout the head and behind the eyes.

Cluster headaches happen over a period of time that group together. They can occur several times a day for lengths of time or disappear for months only to come back and cluster again.

Sinus headaches are very common. They are triggered when the sinuses get inflamed from weather or other outside factors.

Sinus headache pain is deep within the forehead, nose and cheekbones with runny nose, fullness of ears and face swelling. Sinus medication and ear, nose and throat (ENT) doctors can treat sinus headaches.

Tension type headaches can be treated with over-the-counter medications or may not be needed. Acetaminophen, aspirin, and ibuprofen can be helpful, but can cause rebound headaches and should be used with caution.

Treatment will depend on how frequent and intense the headache is. Adults and children can have transformed headaches, which is a combination of migraine and tension type headaches. These are more complicated in treatment and will require medical professional advice for medication purposes.

Once the type of headache and triggers are identified, a doctor can find an effective treatment plan to treat and prevent headaches.

Headache Triggers and Treatment

Common triggers for headaches are:

- Anxiety
- Stress
- Muscle strain
- Sinus pressure

Relaxation techniques can work as a preventative to reduce stress and anxiety:

- Massage and neck stretching help with muscle tension and recoil.
- Meditation, relaxation exercises and visualization calm the body and mind in order to deal with head pain more efficiently.
- Heat and ice therapy, through showers, heating pads, and ice packs, can help with pain.

What Is a Migraine?

Migraine is described as pounding, throbbing pain that is moderate to severe. The length of time can vary from hours to days or weeks.

Migraines typically affect one side of the head, but can resonate through both sides in many cases.

Episodic migraine is described as less than 15 migraine days a month. Chronic migraines are defined as more than 15 migraine days a month and can extremely affect quality of life and daily tasks. They occur more often in women, but are not uncommon to be found in children and men.

A small percentage of children are known to have abdominal migraines, which include digestive symptoms and stomach pains. The intensity of some migraine headaches require emergency room visits to contain.

Many symptoms precede migraine in a prodome and aura phase. Prodome can happen from 12 to 24 hours prior to a migraine attack. Aura typically occurs 10 minutes to an hour before an attack — not all migraine sufferers have aura.

Aura symptoms include: seeing spots or flashing lights, blind spots or wavy lines in vision, phantom smells, unusual sense of taste or heightened touch, lack of mental alertness or clarity, and tingling or numbness in hands or face

Next page: a look at migraine symptoms and triggers, and how to treat them.

What Is a Migraine?

Migraine Symptoms and Triggers

Symptoms associated with migraine can include some or all of:

- Upset stomach, abdominal pain or loss of appetite
- Constipation
- Nausea or vomiting
- Pain behind one eye or both
- Pain in temples or across the forehead
- Pain in back of head or neck stiffness
- Pain in jaw or tooth pain
- Sensitivity to light, sound or smell
- Blurred vision or blind spots
- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Paleness

- Warm or cold sensations especially in extremities (toes, fingers, nose) or chills
- Slight fever
- Irritability, mood swings or depression
- Food cravings
- Yawning

Migraine triggers vary in each sufferer. Some may consist of:

- Environment or weather
- Stress
- Lack of sleep
- Diet
- Alcohol
- Smells (such as cigarette smoke or perfume)
- Hormones
- Lights or sounds
- Physical activity
- Dehydration
- Extreme heat or cold

Preventing and Treating a Migraine

Prevention techniques can be helpful in lessening the frequency or severity of attacks. Along with the techniques to help headaches and improve stress management listed above, there are different ways to live preventatively.

- **Eliminate trigger foods and change your diet.** Trigger foods may include alcohol, caffeine, MSG, aged cheese, and processed foods.
- **Try acupuncture and massage.** You can also use epsom salt baths at home to relax tense muscles and ease pain.
- **Physical therapy, yoga, and/or gentle stretching can help.** This can help the neck and shoulder tension that's common in migraineurs.
- **Try biofeedback.** This therapy is said to help you gain control over involuntary functions in your body, such as a migraine.
- **Medication can be used for prevention and abortive purposes.** Botox, antidepressants, blood pressure medication, antiepileptic medication, anti-nauseants, non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs), and triptans are all used to treat migraines.

Medications should be prescribed and recommended by a qualified doctor. Neurologists and doctors who specialize in headache disorders are recommended versus a general practitioner with headaches.

Medications cause side effects and should be taken with care, under supervision and compared with other medications taken by a pharmacist. From time to time the body and its reactions to medications change, therefore making open communication and frequent doctors visits crucial in finding the best preventative and abortive.

The Bottom Line

Although headache and migraine have many overlapping triggers, symptoms and treatments, they are distinctly different. A bad headache is not a migraine.

Although migraine is a severe headache, it also involves many other symptoms and is a neurological disease requiring specialists and unique treatment. Migraine is often stigmatized as less than it is by the confusion of being a headache when it is so much more.

Next time you hear someone compare their headache to a migraine, please pass along this article and educate them on the difference between headaches and migraines.