What Does a Migraine Feel Like?

by BARBARA LEECH

Describing a Migraine to Someone Who Doesn't Get Them

The feeling is all too familiar — you wake up and you feel like your head, or part of it, is being crushed. A migraine is coming on.

My level of pain with migraine varies from mild to an intensity that makes me question if I have a blood clot that could kill me. It really depends upon each individual attack.

I have had people ask how I know it is really a migraine, and not just a headache. So, I have learned how to describe how a migraine feels in a way people usually understand and realize that the differences are not subtle.

I am one of the 35 million migraine sufferers in the United States who get frequent migraines. I can testify that the pain level of a migraine is debilitating.

This neurological condition negatively impacts our quality of life, work, relationships and daily functioning.

But, describing the actual pain in a way others understand can be difficult, especially since there are so many myths out there that make people question migraine's validity.

Here Is How I Describe My Migraines So People Understand

When I Know One Is Coming

- I can begin the day feeling like one side of my head has a pressure in it, like something is swelling or even intense enough that it already feels ready to burst.
- My neck may hurt into my jaw and my eyes feel the pressure as well.
- The sunshine on the way to work feels like the burning light of 1,000 suns and increases my pain more.
- Moving my head sends shockwaves of pain through me and I become nauseous by the time I arrive at my desk.
- Perfume or other intense scents make the pain worse.

The Pain Is Different Than All Others

- The pain takes on different levels and can begin to feel like a nerve is also involved.
- Imagine a crushing, pressurized pain combined with that weird funny bone pain that you get from nerve involvement — but this encompasses your head (often just one side), your eyes, and parts of your face, jaw and neck.
- The pain can be so severe that I cannot hold down food and I find myself feeling like it will never stop — like maybe eventually this will kill me.
- I feel completely hopeless and desperate.

- My vision can become blurry and I see flashes of light.
- Thinking clearly is difficult, talking is a huge effort and carrying on with life is beyond challenging.

This can all last for at least three days — often five.

Describing a Headache Versus a Migraine

Science has proven there is a difference when it comes to migraines vs headaches. As a sufferer you clearly feel that difference.

- With an ordinary headache what typically occurs is a narrowing of blood vessels within the head, which can easily be eased by taking over-the-counter aspirin or other pain relievers.
- With migraines what occurs is swelling and expansion of blood vessels, and though certain treatments may provide migraine relief, there is no cure and many remedies simply do not work on this level of pain.

As a sufferer I absolutely feel the pressure from those cranial blood vessels as they begin to dilate, which triggers nerve endings to release chemical neurotransmitters. The result is incredible, unbearable nerve pain and increased sensation to the other senses, so then light, noise and movement make my pain worse.

Understanding

When you suffer from migraines, one of the most exhausting — and sometimes disturbing — parts of dealing with this chronic condition is getting people to understand what you are feeling and going through.

From friends to family, to your boss and co-workers, people are quick to judge you if they have not experienced migraine pain. So, taking the time to describe your pain, in terms and details that people can relate to, goes a long way in generating compassion and understanding from those around you.