



Language Guide

2025



What Is Migraine?

Migraine is a very common and complex inherited neurological disorder of sensory processing. This means the migraine brain processes things in a different way compared to those who don't have migraine.

When we discuss migraine, we are often referring to migraine attacks, which are the flare ups or episodes which involve a combination of neurological symptoms such as severe headache, sensitivity to light, noise, smells, nausea or vomiting, and in some cases, weakness, numbness, dizziness and problems with vision.

When a migraine attack is triggered, there are three things we know are happening in the body:

1. Pain nerves in the head and the neck are irritated;
2. Blood vessels in the head spasm;
3. Inflammation occurs in the affected part of the brain.

However, migraine is a complex condition and the symptoms vary widely. For example, it is important to know that some people with migraine do not get a headache at all. Migraine is a spectrum disorder, with some people completely disabled, some are significantly affected, and others only experiencing mild symptoms. As is the case with most spectrum disorders, people will often move up and down the spectrum throughout their life.

Migraine cannot be cured – it is a genetic condition – but it can be managed by finding the right combination of lifestyle changes, acute treatment, and if necessary, preventive treatment.

Who is Migraine Australia?

Migraine Australia is a national patient advocacy organisation working to support Australians living with migraine and their families. Importantly, Migraine Australia is the only organisation in the country that is led by people living with migraine. Through advocacy, information and support, our mission is:

1. To actively and demonstrably improve the quality of life and wellbeing of Australians living with migraine and their families.
2. To reduce the burden of migraine on both those directly affected and the broader community.
3. To educate the broader community about migraine disorders to correct misinformation and raise awareness.



Why Do We Need A Language Guide?

Language plays a vital role in how we understand the world. When talking about health, sometimes the language we use gives the impression that people did something to deserve being sick, or it is their fault, when this is absolutely not true.

Language can be used to disparage and belittle people, labelling them as helpless or as victims of their medical conditions. In the case of migraine, the language we use can reinforce the misunderstanding that migraine is just a headache. Choosing language that reinforces these misconceptions, makes people with health conditions vulnerable to being stigmatised.

A survey of Migraine Australia members found that 94% experienced stigma due to their migraine diagnosis.

This ranges from feeling like doctors aren't taking them seriously or being treated as drug-seekers when trying to access care or medication, through to friends and family treating them like they're making it up or calling it 'just a bad headache'.

Migraine stigma is most commonly experienced when dealing with doctors, followed by co-workers.

Stigma in either a medical setting or the workplace is dangerous and can result in people not receiving the care they need or being financially disadvantaged through reduced opportunities for promotion, demotion or, in some instances, loss of employment altogether.

Because of the widespread experience of stigma and the potential implications of that stigma, addressing it head-on is the most important thing we can do to help everyone in the migraine community. A language guide is an important step in that process.

A language guide is a common tool used by many health advocacy organisations to help fight stigma and increase understanding of their condition by encouraging more accurate and respectful choice of language.

The language used by medical experts, the media, the public and stakeholders of our own community can greatly impact how people living with migraine are perceived and treated.

By using this guide to help change the language you use to talk about migraine you can help improve the lives and wellbeing of everyone living with migraine.



4.9 million

Australians live with migraine



1 in 3 adult women

live with migraine

(71% of migraine patients are women)



\$36b per year

Migraine costs the Australian economy



Migraine Australia

is the only migraine patient organisation
in Australia

Talking About People

When we talk about people living with any medical condition, it is important to make the person and not the condition the central part of the conversation.

While there are terms that label or exclusively identify a person as being the disease (i.e. 'asthmatic' or 'diabetic'), it is much more respectful to refer to them as a 'person living with x' instead. So, in our case, try to use 'person living with migraine' instead of 'migraineur'. This also allows for specification by subtype where appropriate. For example, 'person living with vestibular migraine'.

If you are a person living with migraine and you are talking about yourself, you can use whatever language you like. It can be very difficult to explain migraine to others, so don't make it harder on yourself by worrying about correct terminology.

Some people who live with migraine take pride and ownership in the term 'migraineur', while others prefer to describe themselves as a 'migraine warrior'. However, whatever language you use about yourself does not give others the right to label you as your disease.

Calling someone a 'sufferer', equally diminishes the individual, making them seem like a helpless victim of their condition.

In the case of migraine it is not always accurate: you can live with migraine and not 'suffer' much at all. We suffer from the symptoms of migraine and the resulting disability, but not the condition itself.

Good!	Okay	Avoid
People living with migraine	People/ women/men with migraine	People suffering from migraine, migraine sufferers, migraineurs
Person living with migraine	Person/woman/ man with migraine	Person suffers from migraine, migraine sufferer, migraineur



'People living with migraine' ✓
'Migraine sufferers' ✗

When can you use 'suffer'?

Suffer is a problematic word when talking about health conditions as sometimes it is appropriate, and in other situations it is inappropriate. We do suffer from our symptoms – headache, nausea, light sensitivity and so on. But the term 'migraine sufferer' diminishes the whole person to merely a victim of migraine.

A simple rule is that 'suffer' is ok when talking about symptoms, but not when talking about the person or disorder more generally. 'Experience' and 'living with' are good alternative terms to use instead of suffer. Example sentence: People living with migraine often suffer from complex neurological symptoms and may not experience headache at all.

Talking About Migraine

When talking about migraine, the most important thing to remember is that it is a genetic, incurable condition.

We are born with it and live with it for our entire lives, regardless of whether or not we experience identifiable symptoms. For this reason, the commonly used 'migraines' is both inaccurate and unhelpful as it reinforces the myth that migraine is a headache, or similar temporary discomfort.

If you think about it, we don't say 'asthmas' or 'diabeteses' – so why do we say 'migraines'? If you're talking about the condition, drop the 's'.

If you like, you can say migraine disorder to be clearer that you are talking about the condition and not its symptoms.

'Migraine' ✓

'Migraines' ✗

For the same reason, an episode or flare up of migraine symptoms is not 'a migraine'. Most doctors use 'migraine attack' to describe the combination of neurological symptoms that can occur at one period of time.

When talking about multiple symptomatic periods, the plural is the attack, not the migraine: 'migraine attacks'. For example, "I was diagnosed with migraine in my early twenties, but it wasn't until my early thirties that I started getting weekly migraine attacks", is an accurate way to refer to repeated bouts of symptoms.

When talking about migraine, it's important not to imply that it is curable or cured. It is possible to be free of symptoms, but not free of the underlying genetic condition. Some talk about being in 'remission' when they are symptom free, which is problematic because it is so heavily associated with cancer, but it is acceptable.

It's more accurate and easier to say the person living with migraine is currently free of symptoms or does not currently experience migraine attacks.

Under no circumstances should a treatment of any kind, whether it be a medication, therapy or surgery, be reported as 'curing' migraine.

Good!	Okay	Avoid
Migraine, migraine disorder	Migraine disease	Migraines, migraine headache
Migraine attack, migraine attacks	Migraine episode, migraine episodes	A migraine, migraines, migraine headache(s)
Symptom free	Remission	Cured

'Migraine attack or episode' ✓

'A migraine' ✗



Migraine Is Not A Metaphor

Don't call your headache a migraine, or migraine a headache

Possibly the most damaging aspect of language for migraine stigma is the misuse of the word migraine when another meaning is intended.

The most common way migraine is misused is when the author or speaker means 'severe headache'.

We often see this in general conversation, or in news stories talking about someone with another medical condition that had a symptom of severe headache.

It is important to recognise that while most people living with migraine do get head pain, it is only one of a large array of symptoms, and there are plenty of people living with migraine who do not experience headache.

Migraine and headache are not interchangeable terms.

The other common way that migraine is misused is as a metaphor to describe the pain or discomfort caused by a social problem. For example, news stories have used 'migraine' to mean a 'big problem' for government, sporting teams, or companies. Commentators may complain that the actions of a politicians or other public figures 'gave them a migraine'. Please only use the word migraine if you are actually talking about migraine.

Doctors misuse the word 'migraine' too...

Doctors are not immune from misusing the word 'migraine'.

Aside from misdiagnosis, which is a significant problem, patients with other disorders frequently describe their headaches as 'migraines' because their doctors do. This is more noticeable in those who have only received GP or emergency care for their condition, or perhaps are seeing a neurologist who does not specialise in headache disorders and/or is trying to use more friendly language the patient can relate to.

Much more needs to be done to raise awareness in the medical community of migraine as a complex primary neurological disorder, not a headache, and not a symptom of anything else.

Don't call anything else migraine

The Difference Between Headache And Migraine

- A headache is when you experience head pain with no other symptoms – just pain
- A migraine attack is when you have head pain AND other symptoms such as light sensitivity, sound sensitivity, nausea, vomiting or inability to complete your daily activities



Challenges In Discussing Migraine

The chronic vs episodic problem

One of the most confusing aspects of migraine terminology is the use of 'episodic' and 'chronic' to describe attack frequency.

These terms are confusing, have too many conflicting meanings, and are at odds with the way 'episodic' and 'chronic' are used in the rest of the medical literature and the broader community. For example, an episodic migraine patient is a chronic pain patient.

The arbitrary line of 15 days is without scientific basis and conveys nothing about the level of disability experienced by patients. Additionally, there is confusion and disagreement amongst doctors and other stakeholders about what 'counts' as a migraine day.

The terminology we would like used in place of episodic and chronic is::

- **'Manageable'**
Meaning those who are able to manage their symptoms.
- **'Difficult to manage'**
Meaning those who are unable to manage symptoms without multiple medications or other interventions.

This language reflects migraine impact rather than frequency, giving people a better indication of where an individual is at in their migraine journey, and making it clear that the goal is to get all patients to a state where their migraine is effectively managed.

Medical professionals will likely continue to use the terms episodic and chronic in a clinical sense with the appropriate definitions. We believe that it would reduce confusion within the community, and fight the myth that bad migraine means lots of headache days, if we can stop using the terms episodic and chronic in general conversation and discussion of migraine.

'Migraine headache'

'Migraine headache' is a term that should be strictly avoided outside of a clinical setting.

This phrase reinforces the myth that migraine is just a headache and is often misused as the name of the condition. The only appropriate time to use the term 'migraine headache' is when discussing a person's symptoms and wanting to distinguish their migraine associated headaches from other headaches.

When wanting to describe headache that is similar to migraine in presentation in a patient with another medical condition, the correct term is 'migraine-like headache'. This is discussed in more detail in the International Classification for Headache Disorders.

'Cluster Migraine'

Recently an increasing number of people have been describing their diagnosis as 'cluster migraine'. Cluster headache (or cluster disorder) is a different type of headache disorder, and therefore this term is very confusing.

There is no such thing as 'cluster migraine' and as such it's never really clear if people using this term have cluster or migraine disorder. Please do not use the term 'cluster migraine' in any setting.



Further Resources

Further resources on how to discuss and depict migraine:

- Refer to our website
migraine.org.au/language
- The US Coalition of Headache and Migraine Patients (CHAMP) language guide can be found here:
headachemigraine.org
- Painaustralia also has a language guide available for discussing pain, available from their website:
pinaustralia.org.au



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