

# 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.

Most people don't know they have migraine until they start getting migraine attacks. Migraine attacks are the flare ups or episodes which involve a combination of neurological symptoms such as severe headache, sensitivity to light, noise, smells, speech difficulties, nausea or vomiting, and in some cases, weakness, numbness, dizziness and problems with vision.

Many people who live with migraine may be symptom free for years and never know they have migraine. For others, migraine attacks are frequent and can be quite debilitating. Some people also have symptoms between attacks.

## What causes migraine?

Migraine is a genetic condition. People with migraine have variations in their genetic code that make the networks in their brain hyperexcitable.

These hyperexcitable brain networks can react abnormally to things such as light, noise, smells, diet or hormonal changes. Abnormal reactions in different areas of the brain contribute to different symptoms of the migraine attack, such as headache, nausea, sensitivity to light and neck stiffness.

**You cannot cure migraine**, but it can be managed once you find the right combination of medications, lifestyle habits and tools that work for you.

## How do I manage migraine?

Managing migraine well requires three things:

### 1. Lifestyle changes.

Consider changes to your diet or environment, such as getting enough sleep, eating well and avoiding alcohol.

### 2. Acute treatment.

There are a range of medications and other tools you can use, such as ice packs, hot showers, sleep, and rest in a dark, quiet space, to help relieve the symptoms of migraine attack.

### 3. Preventative treatment.

If you experience more than four migraine affected days per month, talk to your doctor about trying preventative medications.

## IMPORTANT!

It is important to understand that while the word migraine is misused to mean 'bad headache', migraine is not a headache. Headache is just one of the possible symptoms of a migraine attack. Headache without accompanying symptoms, such as nausea or light sensitivity, is rarely diagnosed as migraine.

## Did you know?

A third of migraine patients experience 'aura' which is a range of neurological symptoms such as seeing lines, zigzag patterns, or a colourless 'hole' in the vision, numbness and weakness, dizziness or speech difficulties, prior to the headache. Some people only have the aura symptoms and do not get headache.

## Where can I get help?

For most people, migraine can be managed effectively by your GP without the need for specialists or tests.

However, Migraine Australia recommends asking for a referral to a neurologist to confirm the diagnosis when you are first diagnosed, and getting an MRI is a good idea if you have complex symptoms.

**Physiotherapy or other physical therapy can be helpful.** A dietician can assist you to figure out a diet that avoids any food triggers. As migraine is commonly linked with anxiety and

depression, having a psychologist as part of your care team is strongly recommended.

For support from others who live with migraine, join Migraine Australia's network of support groups.  
[migraine.org.au/warriornetwork](http://migraine.org.au/warriornetwork)



LUCY  
MIGRAINE WITH AURA  
SYDNEY, NSW

*BB* I have had headaches since I was 7, but I was not diagnosed with migraine until much later in life due to lack of awareness around this condition. Finding what triggers your migraine attacks and what medications work for you may allow you to live your life to the fullest.



This fact sheet was clinically reviewed by Dr Lakshini Gunasekera (BBMed, MD, FRACP)