

Patient information from the BMJ Group

Migraine in children

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Migraine in children

If you're a child or teenager who gets migraines you'll know how bad these headaches are and how much they can affect your life. If you're a parent of a child who gets migraines you'll have seen how upsetting an attack can be. Fortunately, there are treatments you can try. And simple things, like reducing stress, may help you have fewer migraines.

We've brought together the best research about migraine headaches in children and teenagers and weighed up the evidence about how to treat them. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

What is a migraine?

Migraines are very bad headaches. You might also feel sick, see flashing lights, and not feel able to do anything. In fact, having a migraine might mean you don't want to do anything except lie down in your room.

But even though migraines can be distressing they're not dangerous. They don't mean you or your child have a more serious problem. And you can get back to normal once the migraine has passed.

We don't know why some children and young people get migraines. But there are some things that seem to bring a migraine on. Here are some of them. ^[1] ^[2] ^[3]

- Feeling stressed: for example because of an exam at school or problems with friends.
- Exercise or sport: these seem to bring on a migraine in some children and teenagers, but not in others.
- Certain foods: some people find that eating a particular thing can trigger a migraine. Or missing a meal could bring on a migraine.
- Your period: some girls find that their period can bring on a migraine or that they get migraines at a certain time during their monthly cycle.
- The contraceptive pill: some girls find that taking the pill can bring on migraines.

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Remember, though, that the things that trigger a migraine are different for everyone. So if you like playing sport, don't stop just because it might bring on a migraine for someone else. Wait and see which things bring on a migraine for you. If you're a parent, encourage your child to keep on doing things he or she enjoys and not to stop because this activity triggers a migraine in someone else.

What are the symptoms of migraines in children?

The main symptom of a migraine is a bad headache. But some children also feel sick.

Here are the main differences between a migraine and an ordinary headache. ^[4]

- A migraine headache can last a long time. You might have a headache for a few hours. But it could last for up to two days. Or it might only go away when you go to sleep.
- You get a throbbing or pounding feeling in your head, like someone banging a drum.
- It may feel worse if you try to do anything, even just walking around.
- You may feel sick and you may vomit.
- You may find that light or sound hurt your head.

Some children have warning signs before they get a migraine. These warning signs are sometimes called **auras**. You could: ^[5] ^[6]

- Get pins and needles
- Feel full of energy or very tired
- Yawn a lot
- Want to eat certain foods
- See zigzags, shadows, or flashing lights.

How common are migraines in children?

If you're a child or teenager who gets migraines, it might help to know you're not on your own. Lots of people have migraines.

Between about 5 in 100 and 10 in 100 children and teenagers get them. ^[7]

That's about 8 million children in Europe who get migraines.

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Young boys and girls are both equally likely to get migraines. But after puberty more girls than boys get migraines. ^[1] ^[8] ^[9]

It's hard to say how many very young children get migraines. That's because they can't usually explain what's happening to them very clearly. So, their parents or doctor might not be able to tell what's wrong.

What treatments work for migraines in children?

The good news about migraines is that there are several treatments. There hasn't been much research on whether these treatments work for children, although we know that some of them work for adults. They should be used as soon as you realise you are about to have an attack.

Key points about treating migraine in children

- All children who get migraines should be seen by a doctor. It's best to get medical advice before trying over-the-counter medicines for children's migraines.
- You can buy ordinary painkillers, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, from a pharmacy without a prescription. Younger children can take painkillers as syrup. You can also get stronger painkillers on prescription from your doctor.
- Your child may also need medicine to stop him or her feeling sick. A medicine called Migraleve contains a painkiller and a drug to stop you feeling sick.
- If painkillers don't help, there are other medicines for migraine attacks. The one that's usually used is sumatriptan. It comes as a nasal spray.
- You may prefer to get all your medicines on prescription, even if you could buy them from a pharmacy. Children under 16 and students aged 18 or under don't have to pay prescription charges.
- You can take medicine to prevent migraines rather than treating them when they happen. You can also try to avoid things that bring on migraines. Some children find that avoiding certain foods or learning to cope better with stress helps.

When you talk to your doctor about your child's migraines it helps the doctor if you know how often and at what times the migraines happen. Keeping a diary of your child's headaches can help.

We've looked at treatments to tackle a migraine attack, and treatments that children can take to prevent migraines.

- [Treatments for migraine attacks in children](#)
- [Treatments to prevent migraines in children](#)

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There are also things you can try yourself to help with migraines. See [How to help yourself](#) .

If you take medicine for migraines, make sure you read the instructions carefully. Sometimes people take too many painkillers. This can actually mean you get headaches more often. ^[12] ^[13]

Treatment Group 1

Treatments for migraine attacks in children

Here are the treatments available to tackle a migraine when you get one. These treatments need to be taken every day, whether or not you have a migraine.

We've also looked at treatments that try to prevent migraines. See [Treatments to prevent migraines in children](#) .

All children with migraines should see a doctor. It's best to get medical advice before trying over-the-counter medicines for children's migraines.

We've looked at the research and divided the treatments into categories, according to the evidence on whether they work.

Treatments for migraine attacks in children

Treatments that work

- [Sumatriptan](#)

Treatments that are likely to work

- [Paracetamol](#)
- [Ibuprofen and other NSAIDs](#)

Treatments that need further study

- [Codeine](#)
- [Drugs to stop you feeling sick](#)

Treatment Group 2

Treatments to prevent migraines in children

Some children get migraines that are so bad that they interfere with school and social life. If nothing seems to help your migraines, there are medicines you can try to help

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prevent them coming on. But medicines have side effects. Talk to your doctor about what's right for you. To read more, see [Should I take medicine to prevent my migraines?](#)

We've also looked at treatments that help with the pain of a migraine while it's happening. To read more, see [Treatments for migraine attacks in children](#) .

Here are some treatments that try to prevent migraines. We've looked at the best research and given a rating for each treatment according to how well it works.

Treatments to prevent migraines in children

Treatments that are likely to work

- [Learning to cope with stress](#)

Treatments that need further study

- [Anticonvulsants](#)
- [Being careful about what you eat](#)
- [Learning to relax your muscles](#)
- [Biofeedback](#)
- [Beta-blockers](#)
- [Pizotifen](#)

Other treatments

Doctors have tried some other treatments for migraines, although these aren't often used for children or teenagers. We haven't looked at the research on these treatments in the same detail we have for the other treatments we cover. (To find out more, see Our method.) We'll be looking at the research on these treatments in the future.

- [Antidepressants](#)
- [Feverfew](#)

What will happen to me?

Some people who have migraines as children stop getting them as they get older. But some people start getting them as teenagers and keep getting them as they get older.

People who don't get migraines don't always understand how distressing these attacks can be. They may think you're making a fuss if you're off school with a headache or need

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to rest in a darkened room. But getting lots of migraines can stop you doing the things you enjoy and have a big effect on your life. ^[5]

It might make you feel better to know that, although migraines can feel terrible, they don't mean that there's anything seriously wrong, such as a brain tumour.

If you're a parent of a young child who gets migraines you might be able to make them feel better by reassuring them that there's nothing seriously wrong. ^[10]

If you get migraines as a child, the good news is you might stop getting them when you reach puberty. ^[1] There's more than a 50 percent chance that you'll stop getting them.

If you start getting migraines as a teenager, you'll probably still get them when you're an adult. But migraines tend not to be as bad when you get older. ^[11]

There are also things you can try yourself to help with migraines. To read more, see [How to help yourself](#) .

Treatments:

Sumatriptan

In this section

Sumatriptan belongs to a group of drugs called triptans. Triptans are medicines that are designed to treat migraines and other headaches. They make the blood vessels in your brain narrower. The theory is that this stops you feeling the pain of a migraine.

Doctors may recommend sumatriptan if ordinary painkillers haven't worked.

The brand name for sumatriptan is Imigran. You take sumatriptan when the pain of your headache is just starting. ^[13]

You can buy sumatriptan tablets from a pharmacy. But they're not recommended for anyone under 18. Children should only take sumatriptan tablets if they've been prescribed by a doctor, usually a specialist. ^[16]

For children, sumatriptan comes as a spray that you put into your nose. ^[17] It's only recommended for children who are 12 or older. ^[18] It's available on prescription from a doctor, and will usually have to be prescribed by a specialist.

Most of the research has looked at children who've taken a sumatriptan nasal spray. In trials, 65 in 100 children had less pain after using the spray, compared with 51 in 100 children who took a dummy treatment (a placebo). ^[19] About 40 in 100 children got completely better with treatment, compared with 26 in 100 children taking a placebo.

There hasn't been much research on whether sumatriptan tablets can help children or teenagers with a migraine. But we do know they work for adults with migraines. ^[20]

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Sumatriptan can have side effects. Between about 20 in 100 and 30 in 100 children and teenagers find that food tastes different while they're taking it, depending on their dose.

Other side effects include feeling hot, dizzy, weak, sick, or drowsy. Some children also find that the spray irritates their nose. ^[18]

Taking sumatriptan with some types of antidepressant drug can cause a condition called **serotonin syndrome**. ^[21] You should take your child to see a doctor or to an emergency department straight away if they have these symptoms after taking sumatriptan:

- Feeling jittery or restless
- Feeling sick
- Diarrhoea.

This drug may not be suitable for children who have heart problems. And children should not take other medicines for migraines while they're taking sumatriptan. ^[18] Your doctor will tell you if sumatriptan is suitable for your child.

We don't know as much about using other triptans to treat migraines in children, including almotriptan, rizatriptan, zolmitriptan, and eletriptan. Not much good-quality research has been done on these drugs in children, and these medicines are not usually prescribed to people under 18. However, one large study suggested that children who took almotriptan tablets had less pain after two hours than those who took a dummy treatment. ^[22] But we need more research to know for certain.

Paracetamol

In this section

Doctors usually recommend trying simple painkillers for a migraine. If these help, you might not need any other treatment. A common painkiller you can buy over the counter is paracetamol.

Another common painkiller is [ibuprofen](#). Aspirin is a useful painkiller for adults, but anyone under 16 shouldn't take aspirin. It can cause a dangerous problem called Reye's syndrome. ^[23]

It's best to take painkillers as soon as you feel a migraine coming on. If you wait until your migraine gets really bad, they might not help as much.

Most painkillers come as tablets. If you find these hard to swallow, you could try the kind you dissolve in a glass of water. This type might even work better. ^[18] Your body may absorb them more easily.

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If you're the parent of a young child who can't swallow tablets it may be best to give them a liquid painkiller such as Calpol (liquid paracetamol).

Some painkillers come combined with another drug to stop you feeling sick.

There's no good-quality research showing that paracetamol helps children and teenagers with migraines. But we do know that it can reduce pain in general, and doctors often recommend it for children with migraines. ^[18]

Painkillers can have side effects. You should only take painkillers when you really need them. If you take them a lot you can start to get more headaches. ^[18] ^[13]

Paracetamol can cause severe liver damage if you take too much of it. This can be bad enough to kill you, so always read the instructions that come with it. If you're a parent, you should be careful how much paracetamol you give to your child. If your child is old enough to take paracetamol on their own, you should check how much they take. If you're an older child or teenager, don't take more than the recommended dose for your age.

Ibuprofen and other NSAIDs

In this section

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are a type of painkiller. Ibuprofen (brands include Anadin and Nurofen) is a commonly used NSAID that's available over the counter. If you have a young child who doesn't like swallowing tablets you can get liquid ibuprofen (one brand is Calprofen).

Small doses of an NSAID called diclofenac are available without a prescription for children over 14. But you'll need a prescription from the doctor for younger children. Check with your doctor or pharmacist if you're not sure whether a particular medicine is suitable for your child. People who have heart problems should not take diclofenac. ^[24]

Most other NSAIDs are only available on prescription.

There isn't much research on whether NSAIDs can help children and teenagers with migraines. ^[19] ^[25] But we know these drugs work for adults. ^[26] ^[27] ^[28] ^[29] And doctors sometimes recommend them for children with migraines.

NSAIDs can cause an upset stomach. But this side effect is less common in children than in adults. ^[30] These drugs can also cause asthma to get worse. ^[30] If your child has asthma, ask your doctor whether this medicine is suitable.

Codeine

In this section

Codeine is a strong painkiller. It's not usually recommended for children and shouldn't be given to children aged 12 and younger. ^[31] ^[32]

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You can buy a medicine called Migralve from pharmacies. It contains a small dose of codeine combined with paracetamol and an antihistamine to help with feelings of nausea.

We haven't found any good research looking at whether codeine can help children or teenagers with a migraine.

Codeine can cause side effects. These include feeling sick, vomiting, feeling drowsy, a dry mouth, constipation, difficulty urinating, and trouble breathing, especially in young children.^[32] Codeine can also be addictive. If you take it for too long you can get unpleasant withdrawal symptoms when you stop.

Drugs to stop you feeling sick

In this section

Migraines can make some children and teenagers feel sick and vomit. You can get medicine to help with this. There isn't any good-quality research on them, so we can't say for sure they will work.

There are several different types of medicine for nausea. We've listed the main types. You can take these medicines in several ways. They come as tablets, powders you dissolve in water, and syrups. But it can sometimes be difficult for children to swallow medicines if they're being sick a lot. So some of these drugs come as suppositories. These are tablets that you put up your rectum (back passage). However, many older children find this embarrassing. So doctors may avoid suppositories except for very young children.

- **Antihistamines:** you can buy antihistamines from a pharmacy or get them on prescription. Some brand names are Avomine and Stugeron. Some over-the-counter medicines are only suitable for children over certain ages. Check the packaging or ask your pharmacist for advice. You can also get an antihistamine combined with the painkillers paracetamol and codeine. Its brand name is Migralve. You can buy it in pharmacies. Codeine shouldn't be given to children aged 12 and younger.^[31] Some antihistamines can make you drowsy.^[33]
- **Phenothiazines:** you can only get these medicines on prescription. Some brand names are Fentazin, Stelazine, and Stemetil. They're only used for children and teenagers with very bad nausea, or if other medicines haven't worked. They can have unpleasant side effects such as twitches and jerks in your face and body.^[18] Young children and girls are especially likely to get these side effects.
- **Domperidone:** for treating migraine, you can get this medicine on prescription. Its brand name is Motilium. Some domperidone products can legally be sold over the counter, but they're not intended to treat migraines.^[34]

Learning to cope with stress

In this section

Stress can bring on a migraine for some children and teenagers. You might have an exam coming up, have problems with your friends, or have had a few late nights in a row. Learning to cope when you feel stressed might help you avoid migraines.

There are lots of ways to cope with stress. You can learn relaxation techniques, or do yoga or regular exercise. You can get books or tapes with advice about how to deal with stress. Or you can go and see a therapist who will advise you on how to cope.

One small study found that learning to cope with stress helped some children and teenagers with migraines.^[35] It found that about two-thirds of children who used books or tapes with advice about reducing stress had headaches less often. The headaches they did have weren't as bad as before. And almost half of children who saw a therapist also improved.

Reducing your stress levels seems to work better than just avoiding things that might trigger a migraine.

Anticonvulsants

In this section

Anticonvulsant drugs are usually used to treat seizures. They've also been used to try to prevent migraines. These drugs include:

- Topiramate (Topamax)
- Sodium valproate (Epilim).

We don't know yet whether anticonvulsants can help prevent migraines. There hasn't been enough good-quality research.^[36]

In one study looking at topiramate, it didn't make much difference to the number of days children had migraines for each month.^[37]

- Children taking topiramate had about two-and-a-half fewer days each month when they suffered from a migraine.
- Children taking a dummy treatment (a **placebo**) had two fewer migraine days each month.
- The difference between the two groups of children was small enough to be down to chance.

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In a newer study of adolescents aged 12 to 17 years, topiramate was helpful at a higher dose (100 milligrams a day) but not at a lower dose. Youngsters taking 100 milligrams had migraines on fewer days than if they were taking a placebo drug. ^[38]

These drugs can cause side effects, but we don't know how common these are. ^[39] Topiramate can cause problems with your eyes, and sodium valproate can cause problems with your liver. Your doctor will want to keep an eye on you in case you get these problems.

In one study, 8 in 10 children taking topiramate lost weight, 2 in 10 found it harder to concentrate at school, and 2 in 10 got a tingling feeling in their skin. ^[40] In another study, children aged 12 to 17 who took topiramate had lower scores on tasks measuring memory and how quickly they processed information, compared with children who took a placebo. ^[41] However, the difference was fairly small. Topiramate can also cause nausea, tummy pain, loss of appetite, problems sleeping, and mood changes. ^[39]

Sodium valproate can cause stomach irritation, shaking, and make you put on weight. ^[39]

There is a very small chance that taking anticonvulsants might make your child more likely to think about suicide or harming themselves. ^[42] If you are worried about any changes in mood or behaviour in your child, see your doctor straight away.

Being careful about what you eat

In this section

There hasn't been much good research on whether certain foods can trigger migraines. ^[43] So we can't say for certain whether being careful about what you eat can help you. But if you notice that you tend to have migraines after eating particular foods, you might be able to reduce the number of migraines you have by avoiding these foods.

As you probably eat all sorts of things, and it's hard to remember what you ate and when, you might want to try keeping a diary. You could write down what you eat, and make a note of the days when you get a migraine. This might help you work out whether some foods can trigger a migraine for you.

The foods that can trigger a migraine may be different for everyone. But there are some foods that lots of people with migraines think can bring on a headache. Here are some of them: ^[44]

- Drinks that have a lot of caffeine, such as tea, coffee, or cola
- Foods that are pickled, dried, or aged, such as soy sauce, pepperoni, salami, mature cheese, or nuts

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- Foods that contain a flavouring called monosodium glutamate, such as Asian food (Chinese, Thai, or Japanese)
- Bovril and Marmite.

Some people also find that chocolate, cheese, or some fruits trigger a migraine.^[44] Other people find that it's not what they eat exactly, but when. They might get migraines if they miss a meal or go on a diet. Some people get migraines when they haven't been drinking enough water.

Learning to relax your muscles

In this section

This treatment is sometimes called relaxation training or progressive muscle relaxation. The idea behind it is that if you can relax your body, your mind relaxes too. Some people think that feeling tense or stressed can trigger migraines. So learning to relax might mean you don't get as many headaches.

Someone will teach you how to relax your muscles. In one study we looked at, children and teenagers learned how to relax in six sessions with a therapist.^[45] The sessions lasted an hour. The children did physical exercises, such as tensing muscles in their body for a few seconds, then relaxing.

For example, you might tense the muscles in your face by raising your eyebrows as far as you can. Then you relax your face completely for a few seconds. You do this with groups of muscles all over your body. Once you've learned these exercises, you can carry on doing them at home.

The research doesn't give a clear answer about whether learning to relax your muscles can help to prevent migraines. In one study, there was no difference between children who learned to relax their muscles and children who had lessons on coping with stress.^[46]

Biofeedback

In this section

Biofeedback is a treatment that shows you how to have more control over your body. It's often used to help people with pain or to teach people to relax.

The kind of biofeedback that's been tried for migraines is called **thermal biofeedback**. You'll have sessions with someone who'll teach you how to do it.

You wear a sensor on one of your fingers. The sensor is connected to a small machine. The aim is to try to make your hand warmer by thinking about it. The machine will beep

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or show numbers to let you know how you're doing. The idea is that making your hand warmer by thinking about it teaches you how to control your body better.

Although doctors have tried this treatment for children and teenagers with migraines, there's not much research on it. ^[47] So we can't say whether biofeedback can help you have fewer headaches.

Beta-blockers

In this section

Beta-blockers are medicines that are mainly used for people with heart problems. Sometimes they are used to help children who get a lot of bad migraines.

The beta-blocker that's used most often for migraines is called propranolol. Its brand name is Inderal. You take it as tablets or a liquid. You need to take it every day, usually two or three times a day.

We don't know if these drugs can help prevent migraines for children, because different studies have had different results. One small study looked at 32 children. The children who took propranolol all said it helped them. But in another study, researchers found that propranolol actually made people's migraines worse. ^[48] People who took propranolol had headaches that lasted about three hours longer, on average.

And another study found that propranolol didn't make any difference to the number of migraines children had. ^[49]

Beta-blockers can cause side effects. In one study, about 1 in 5 children and teenagers had trouble sleeping. ^[50]

Beta-blockers can cause breathing problems in some people. They're not recommended for anyone with lung problems, so children with **asthma** shouldn't take these drugs. ^[51]

Pizotifen

In this section

Pizotifen is a drug for preventing migraines.

You need a prescription from your doctor for this medicine. Its brand name is Sanomigran. You take it as tablets or a liquid. You need to take it every day. You can take it up to three times a day, or you can take just one dose at night before you go to bed. It's only recommended for children older than 2 years. ^[52]

We didn't find any good research to tell us whether taking pizotifen can prevent migraines. But doctors often recommend it for children with migraines.

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This drug can have side effects in children, although we don't know how common they are. They include putting on weight, and feeling drowsy or sick.^[52] Some children and teenagers taking pizotifen feel anxious or depressed, but this is rare.

Teenagers who drive should be careful if they're taking pizotifen, because it can make you feel sleepy. Pizotifen can also increase the effects of alcohol.^[52]

Antidepressants

In this section

Antidepressants such as amitriptyline have been used to try to prevent migraines.^[13] These drugs are usually used to treat depression.

These drugs can have serious side effects, especially in children.^[53] ^[54] Warnings for doctors in the United States say that all antidepressants can make it more likely that children or teenagers will think about committing suicide.^[55] If you are worried about any changes in mood or behaviour in your child, see your doctor straight away.

Feverfew

In this section

Feverfew is a herbal remedy that some adults take to prevent migraines. But we don't know whether it can help children and teenagers who get migraines.

Herbal treatments can still have side effects. And they can react with other medicines you're taking. You should tell your doctor if you're taking a herbal treatment.

Further informations:

How to help yourself

There isn't much research about things you can do to help yourself if you get migraines. But there are some things that children and teenagers find can stop or reduce their attacks.

- Learn to spot the warning signs of a migraine. You can then take your medicine, lie down, or do whatever else you find helps.
- Keep your painkillers with you. Some children keep a bottle of water with them so they can take their tablets as soon as they feel a migraine coming on. But be careful not to take more painkillers than it says in the instructions that come with your medicine.

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- Keep some food with you. Some children find that being hungry brings on a migraine. Eating a snack might help. Trying not to miss meals (like skipping breakfast if you're late for school) might also help.
- Stop working and lie down or sit in a quiet room when you feel an attack coming on. You might want to tell your teacher that you get migraines in case you need to do this at school.
- Go outside and get some fresh air.
- Try to sleep in a quiet, dark room when you have an attack.
- Learn ways to relax.
- Try not to get too tired. Some children and teenagers find it helps to try to go to bed about the same time every night.

Some people find the same things trigger a migraine each time. For example, some foods might trigger a migraine. Or being tired or doing lots of sport might bring on a migraine. Avoiding these things might help you have fewer headaches.

You and your doctor will find it easier to spot the things that trigger a migraine if you keep a diary. Write down what you do and eat each day, and when you get migraines. This will make it easier to work out what triggers your headaches, and you'll be able to avoid these things.

Should I take medicine to prevent my migraines?

Your doctor might recommend medicine to prevent migraines if: ^[14] ^[15]

- You get lots of bad migraines
- Your migraines stop you doing things. You might be missing school or not have enough time for your hobbies.

But medicines can have side effects. So it might be best to see if you can find another way of preventing your migraines. Your doctor might want to try a few other things before he or she suggests you take medicines. ^[15]

- Some people get migraines when they're stressed. Have you been feeling under pressure, for example, to do well at school? Learning ways to relax might help you have fewer headaches.

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- Leading a busy or disorganised life can trigger migraines for some people. Do you often stay up late or miss meals? Stopping these things might help you have fewer migraines.
- Do you often get migraines after eating or drinking a particular thing? Some people can reduce the number of migraines they get by stopping eating some foods. You'll have to try not eating a few different things to work out the foods that can trigger a migraine for you.
- Are you taking another medicine, or anything else that could be triggering your migraines? For example, some girls find that taking the contraceptive pill gives them migraines.

Talk to your doctor about these things. If you can prevent migraines by going to bed at the same time every night or avoiding some foods, it might be better to do this than take drugs.

Your doctor might be able to give you a medicine that helps with the pain when you do get a migraine. Taking painkillers when you need them might be better than taking a drug every day.

If you've tried all these things and they haven't helped, your doctor may recommend medicine to prevent migraines.^[14] You'll need to take your medicine every day.

You might stop getting migraines as you get older.^[1] If this happens, you'll be able to stop taking your medicine.

Glossary:

placebo

A placebo is a 'pretend' or dummy treatment that contains no active substances. A placebo is often given to half the people taking part in medical research trials, for comparison with the 'real' treatment. It is made to look and taste identical to the drug treatment being tested, so that people in the studies do not know if they are getting the placebo or the 'real' treatment. Researchers often talk about the 'placebo effect'. This is where patients feel better after having a placebo treatment because they expect to feel better. Tests may indicate that they actually are better. In the same way, people can also get side effects after having a placebo treatment. Drug treatments can also have a 'placebo effect'. This is why, to get a true picture of how well a drug works, it is important to compare it against a placebo treatment.

constipated

When you're constipated, you have difficulty passing stools (faeces). Your bowel movements may be dry and hard. You may have fewer bowel movements than usual, and it may be a strain when you try to go.

biofeedback

When you have biofeedback, your doctor helps you use a device that measures how fast your heart beats, how fast you're breathing or how tense your muscles are. The information you get from the device is called 'biofeedback'. Biofeedback lets you see how your heartbeat, breathing or muscle tension change when you do things like stand or sit differently, or slow down your breathing. The idea is that you can learn to sense the messages from your body without the device and learn how to control the way you respond to stress.

Beta-blockers

These drugs work by blocking the effects of certain chemicals produced by your body (such as adrenaline). Beta-blockers slow your heart rate and improve the beating of your heart. They are often used in people with angina or heart failure.

asthma

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Asthma is a disease of the lungs. It makes you wheeze, cough and feel short of breath. Asthma attacks are caused by inflammation and narrowing of your airways, which makes it hard for air to pass in and out of your lungs.

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This information is aimed at a UK patient audience. This information however does not replace medical advice. If you have a medical problem please see your doctor. Please see our full [Conditions of Use](#) for this content. For more information about this condition and sources of the information contained in this leaflet please visit the Best Health website, <http://besthealth.bmj.com> . These leaflets are reviewed annually.

