

What Causes Migraines?

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There are many causes of migraines. Sometimes they run in families, and in many cases migraines can go back several generations. Migraines may be caused by changes in the trigeminal nerve, a major pain pathway. Imbalances in brain chemicals, including serotonin ? which helps regulate pain in your nervous system ? may also be involved. Serotonin levels sometimes drop during some migraines. This may trigger your trigeminal system to release substances called neuropeptides which travel to your brain's outer covering (meninges), which then become inflamed. The result is headache pain.

The most common types of headaches are **migraine**, **tension headache**, **sinus headache**, and **mixed headaches**. **Cluster headaches** are another type which cluster in bunches during certain time frames.

Triggers are something that will bring on a headache or migraine. This can include certain foods, changes in a woman's menstrual cycle, certain sensory stimuli like flashing lights or motion, changes in weather, or sensitivity to the cold in winter or hot weather in summer. A common part of treatment is to reduce the possibility of triggers.

Types of triggers:

Foods. Some migraines appear to be triggered by certain foods. Common offenders include alcohol, especially beer and red wine; aged cheeses; chocolate; aspartame; caffeine; monosodium glutamate ? a key ingredient in some Asian foods; salty foods; and processed foods. Skipping meals or fasting also can trigger migraines and headaches.

Hormonal changes. Fluctuations in estrogen seem to trigger headaches in many women who have migraines. Women with a history of migraines often report headaches immediately before or during their periods, when they have a major drop in estrogen. Others have an increased tendency to develop migraines during pregnancy or menopause. Hormonal medications ? such as oral contraceptives and hormone replacement therapy ? may also worsen migraines, though some women find this beneficial.

Sensory stimuli. Bright lights and sun glare can produce migraines, as can loud sounds. Unusual smells ? including pleasant scents, such as perfume, and unpleasant odors, such as paint thinner and secondhand smoke, can also trigger migraines. Patients with chemical sensitivity can have a headache after exposure to chemicals most others can tolerate.

Stress. Stress at work or home can instigate migraines. The lack of stress can also trigger migraines. Some people have a migraine after a big project or when the work week is over.

Changes in wake-sleep pattern. Either missing sleep or getting too much sleep may serve as a trigger for migraine attacks in some individuals, as can jet lag.

Physical factors. Intense physical exertion, including sexual activity, may provoke migraines.

Changes in the environment. A change of weather or barometric pressure can prompt a migraine.

Medications. Certain medications can aggravate migraines.

