

Understanding Migraine Medications

FOR MANY PEOPLE WITH MIGRAINE, medication can be the key to living without debilitating head pain. Being well-informed about all of the different types of medication available is crucial for creating the most effective treatment plan possible. Migraine medication can be broken into two categories: acute medication and preventive medication. This guide will help you determine the best treatment option for you.



Acute Medications

Acute migraine medication is taken on an as-needed basis to stop a migraine as quickly as possible. These medications are ideal for people who don't experience a significant number of migraine attacks per month, or people who have fairly mild attacks. They should be taken as soon as you feel symptoms.

TIP:

If you experience mild, infrequent migraine attacks, over-the-counter analgesics can be a good place to start, as they are cost-effective and easily accessible.

Types of Acute Medications

Analgesics

These include both over-the-counter pain relief medications, like ibuprofen and acetaminophen, as well as prescription pain relief medications, like opioids.

Triptans

These are migraine-specific medications. There are seven different triptans, including Imitrex, Axert and Zomig. Triptans are typically used to treat moderate to severe migraine attacks.

Ergot alkaloids

Migranal and Ergomar are both ergot alkaloids. These drugs are not used commonly, and are typically reserved for patients who don't respond to analgesics or triptans.

Preventative Medications

Preventive migraine medication is ideal if you experience more than four migraine attacks per month, or if your attacks are very severe. They are taken daily, and are often used in conjunction with acute medications.

Types of Preventative Medications

Antihypertensives

Beta blockers, calcium channel blockers, and angiotensive receptor blockers are forms of antihypertensive drugs.

Anticonvulsants

Topiramate and divalproex sodium are approved anticonvulsants for migraine prevention.

Antidepressants

In addition to treating depression, antidepressants—such as amitriptyline and venlafaxine—can be an effective preventive treatment for migraine.

Other preventive medications

include onabotulinumtoxinA, an approved treatment for chronic migraine, and erenumab, a newly approved monoclonal antibody that targets a protein receptor.

Four Things to Do if Your Current Migraine Treatment Isn't Working

1. Keep a headache journal.

Make note of when you had a migraine attack, how severe it was, what medications you took to treat it and the response to the medication. Tracking your migraine attacks will help your health care provider determine which medications work for you.

2. Be on the lookout for rebound headache.

If you are taking acute migraine medications frequently, you may be at risk of medication-overuse headache, also known as rebound headache. Over-the-counter migraine medications, such as Excedrin, can cause rebound headache if used more than eight times per month. Over-the-counter migraine medications and triptans can cause rebound headache if used more than 10 days per month.

3. Consider your other medical conditions.

When treating migraine attacks, health care providers take your medical history into consideration. Some drugs cannot be taken when certain medical conditions are present. In addition, tell your health care provider if you are pregnant or plan on becoming pregnant before starting a new migraine medication.

4. Consult a headache specialist.

When you first experience migraine, speak with your primary care provider (PCP) to develop a customized treatment plan. When your current medications no longer work or your migraine attacks become more frequent, it's time to see a headache specialist, a physician who is trained specifically to treat patients with migraine. Get a headache specialist referral from your PCP, or find one through the American Migraine Foundation's doctor finder.

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The mission of the American Migraine Foundation is to mobilize a community for patient support and advocacy, as well as drive and support impactful research that translates into advances for patients with migraine and other disabling diseases that cause severe head pain. Visit americanmigraine.org for more resources for people living with migraine and their supporters.

American Migraine Foundation

One Rockefeller Plaza, 11th Floor
New York, NY 10020

P: +1 (929)-376-1333

E: info@americanmigraine.org

