



Where is My Headache Coming From?

Is It a MIGRAINE or Not?

By Nesreen Suwan, MD



Migraine is a common neurological disorder that has been under diagnosed and under treated by both patients and physicians. As important as it is not to under diagnose migraines, it is just as important not to over diagnose them, overlooking underlying serious

medical conditions.

Red flags that may point to underlying serious medical conditions include but are not limited to:

- New onset headaches at mid or late life;
- Progressive worsening in frequency or intensity of chronic headaches;
- History of being awakened by headaches;
- Headaches that are aggravated by cough; sexual activity or exercise or changing positions;
- Headaches associated with weakness, numbness, blurring or loss of vision, alteration or loss of consciousness;
- Headaches that are associated with fever, neck stiffness, or mental status changes; and
- Headaches that are associated with a history of recent head trauma or fall, drug abuse or HIV risk factors.

Headaches associated with alteration or loss of consciousness with or without history of recent head trauma may be related to brain bleeding. Headaches associated with alteration or loss of consciousness, neck stiffness or fever may point to infection in the brain or brain coverings, although fever and neck stiffness could be absent in extremes of life, (children and elderly).

Headaches precipitated by cough may point to underlying brain abnormalities. Headaches that are precipitated by sexual activity may point to underlying abnormal vessels in the brain or low pressure in the fluid around the brain. Elderly patients who experience headaches associated with blurring of vision and diminished visual acuity should be evaluated immediately for a condition that may involve inflammation of blood vessels and this may lead to blindness.

As noted above, **head pain could be a symptom of a variety of medical conditions**, including and not limited to the presence of brain bleeding, infections, abnormal vessels in the brain, elevated or diminished pressure in the fluid around the nervous system and inflammatory conditions of the blood vessels. Headaches could also be related to brain tumors, congenital abnormalities in the brain such as low-lying brain or abnormal cysts in the brain. Some headaches can be related to cervical spine arthritis or herniated discs.

Many types of headaches may coexist in the same patient. It is not unusual for patients to have a combination of tension headache and migraine. On the other hand, a patient with chronic tension headache and/or migraine may develop any of the above noted medical conditions such as brain bleeding, infection, tumor, etc.

Determining if the patient is suffering from one type or multiple types of headaches is crucial, and identifying where the headache is coming from is the first step in successful headache management. The most important step in headache management is accurate diagnosis. Diagnosis is obtained by full and thorough evaluation by a specialist. After establishing the accurate diagnosis.

Headache management would never be obtained by consuming analgesics and painkillers.

Migraine is a common type of headache. It is a neurological disorder of a genetic origin that is caused by a sensitized nervous system. Approximately, 30 million Americans are affected by migraines, more women than men. It affects population at ages of their peak productivity.

Many migraine headaches have been misdiagnosed as sinus headaches (headaches attributed to sinusitis). Consequently, patients may attempt ineffectual cure and suffer unnecessarily. At this point their original migraine headache has gone untreated. Migraines gone untreated or under-treated may cause the nervous system to be more sensitive rendering future migraine headaches more frequent, more severe and harder to treat. Other migraine headaches medicated either by patients or physicians with over the counter analgesics overuse may result in resistant rebound headaches and worsening of future migraines.

After appropriate migraine diagnosis, multiple treatment modalities are available, including migraine specific medications which may specifically target the migraine and its associated symptoms in a timely manner.

When migraine starts, daily activities should not be held off, and the day does not have to end. Based on the fact that migraine is a neurological disorder that involves changes in the brain and its vessels, it should be treated under the care of a specialist.

Dr. Nesreen Suwan is a Board Certified Neurologist and Board Certified Pain Management Specialist who specializes in treatment of headaches and migraines and is the director of Midwest Specialty Headache Clinic.

Nesreen Suwan, M.D.

*Board certified Neurologist,
Board certified in Pain Medicine with
extra certification in Headache Medicine*

(630) 245 1010

Naperville Oak Brook Chicago

