

Changes in Headache: When to See Your Doctor

Learn more about which red flags to watch out for and when you should see your doctor

Between 80% to 90% of headaches are primary headaches, meaning that while they are often painful and debilitating, they are not caused by more serious underlying problems like a tumor or blood clot. People with migraine should know that the likelihood of having a serious abnormality in the brain is no different from your next-door neighbor who does not have migraine. However, migraine can make it more difficult to realize when something is wrong.

People with migraine should keep an eye out for abrupt or extreme changes in their headaches. If you experience unusual symptoms, it's time to seek medical attention. But what, exactly, should you be looking out for and how? Here are headache red flags and how to bring them up with your doctor.

Overview

If any of the following headache red flags are present, consult with your doctor. They will want to evaluate your headaches and general health and perform physical and neurologic examinations. In certain situations they may need to order tests or investigations.

Headache Red Flags

Thunderclap Headache: Very severe headache that reaches maximum severity within a couple of seconds

Positional Headache: Headache that substantially changes in intensity with changes in position, like when standing up or lying down

Headaches Initiated by Exertion: Headache starting while coughing, sneezing, and/or straining or during sexual activity

Pregnancy: Headaches that start or change in pregnancy, during labor and delivery, or just after birth.

Constant Headache: Headache that always persists in the same location of the head

New Headaches: Headaches that start or change in people older than 50 or who have other medical conditions that make worrisome headaches more likely, for example a history of cancer, HIV, or other autoimmune illnesses

Substantial Change in Headache Pattern: Significant increase or change in headache frequency, pattern or characteristics

Vision Loss: Headache that is associated with progressive loss of vision in one or both eyes.

Worrisome Neurologic Symptoms: Migraine aura symptoms that have immediate onset, last longer than 60 minutes, or do not resolve or symptoms such as weakness of one side of the body, change in level of consciousness, or significant difficulty with vision, walking, speaking, vertigo, or understanding

Persistent Headache: Headache that never goes away

Systemic Symptoms: Headache along with fever, chills, weight loss, night sweats, or other

How to Look for Red Flags

Keeping track of your migraine symptoms can help manage migraine—and it's the best way to keep an eye out for the red flags outlined above. However you choose to track your headaches gathering this information will help you to understand triggers, the effect of medications, and if any concerning changes are taking place. Here are three ways to track migraine:

Tracking Your Migraine

- **Written Headache Journal:** Tracking your symptoms in a journal or diary allows personalization. You can be as in-depth as you wish, noting when symptoms begin, how well you're sleeping, what you're eating, and everything/anything else.
- **Smartphone App:** There are many apps to track migraine to choose from, so you can find one that works for you. One advantage of apps is that they will remind you to write down your symptoms, so if you fear you may forget, this would be a good route to go.
- **Spreadsheet:** Some like to see how data looks organized in a table. Setting up a spreadsheet is one way to keep track of changes over time and personalize data however it makes sense to you.



Tracking symptoms will make it much easier to notice patterns in your migraine so that you can better communicate with your doctor, manage migraine, and stay on top of warning signs.

Talking to Your Doctor About Red Flags in Migraine

If you notice any sudden, drastic changes in headache, seek immediate medical attention. If you start to notice more gradual (and concerning) changes in the pattern of your migraine, set up an appointment to discuss it with your provider. Ahead of the appointment, write down the changes and how they differ from your usual symptoms to make it easier for your doctor to decide the best next steps, including if brain imaging is necessary.



When Imaging Might Be Necessary

There are no clear-cut rules on when it's right to get a CT scan or MRI. Brain imaging will often be ordered based on the opinion of the provider after significant findings during a neurologic exam. Abnormalities found on a neurologic exam would encompass optic nerve swelling, pupil abnormalities and abnormal reflexes. The choice of imaging depends on the specifics of the individual situation.

Certain situations may also make imaging necessary:

- New headache in a person with cancer
- Headaches in people who are immunosuppressed
- Headaches that are worsening over time
- New headache in people over the age of 50
- Medications don't work or stop working
- Persistent headache after head injury
- Persistent fever or other signs of infection

If you experience any of the symptoms above or have reason to believe something more serious is going on, make an appointment with your provider.

AMERICAN MIGRAINE
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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 americanmigrainefoundation.org for more resources for people living with migraine and their supporters.

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