

FAQ: Understanding Acute Treatment for Migraine

Acute, or rescue, treatment for migraine can help relieve a migraine attack as it's happening.

When a migraine attack strikes, you want relief fast. That's where acute treatment comes into play. Acute medications are taken when you sense the first signs of a migraine attack or early on in an attack, and are designed to stop it before it gets worse.

We're answering some frequently asked questions to help you better understand this key part of a migraine treatment plan.



Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need acute treatment?

Acute treatment is an important part of your overall treatment plan for migraine. It is important for people with frequent or infrequent attacks. It is important for mild or severe attacks. It is important even if you are on preventive treatment.

When do I take acute treatment?

Acute treatments are the most effective when taken as soon as symptoms start. They can not only relieve symptoms but can prevent symptoms from becoming worse. It may also increase the amount of time until the next migraine attack.



How do I decide which acute treatment is right for me?

There are a lot of different types of acute treatments, and each can be taken in a variety of ways. A lot of acute treatments are in pill form, but some are available as nasal sprays or injections. Some injection methods are able to be taken at home but injections are often given in your doctor's office, emergency department, in hospital, or at an infusion center.

The wide availability of different treatments and methods allows patients to find medications that work with their medical history and lifestyle. For example, someone who has an attack that starts quickly might benefit from a nasal spray, and a person with a history of stomach ulcers can work with their doctor to avoid taking NSAIDs.

Medication options can also be by prescription or over-the-counter. While over-the-counter (OTC) medications can be acquired without a prescription, it's important to be aware that they can cause side effects and medication overuse headache (MOH) if taken too often. Talking to your doctor is the best way to find an acute treatment that suits your migraine treatment plan.

What types of acute medications are there?

The six main types of medications for the acute treatment of migraine are:

- Pain relievers like NSAIDs
- Triptans
- CGRP antagonists (gepants)
- Ditans
- Anti-nausea medications
- Dihydroergotamine (DHE)

Type of Treatment	Benefits	Drawbacks	Delivery Methods	OTC/ Prescription
Pain relievers like NSAIDs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many are readily available as over-the-counter medication • Affordable • May be taken alone or with other treatments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patients who use these medications too frequently may develop medication overuse headache • Side-effects include upset stomach, heartburn, bruising • Patients with a history of ulcer disease, kidney disease and heart disease, high blood pressure need to take under a doctor's supervision • Not recommended in the early and late stages of pregnancy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral • Nasal Spray • Injection 	Some available OTC and by prescription
Triptans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readily available by prescription • Migraine specific • Available as pills, nasal sprays and injections, so talk to your doctor about which delivery method is best for you 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common side effects include tingling, sleepiness, flushing, throat or chest tightness • Patients with heart disease, high blood pressure or history of stroke should not take triptans • Not recommended during pregnancy • Patients who use too frequently may develop medication overuse headache 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral • Oral dissolving tablet • Nasal spray • Injection 	Mostly by prescription
CGRP antagonists (gepants)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migraine specific • Likely no risk of medication overuse headache • Can sometimes also be useful for patients who do not respond to triptans or have side effects from triptans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Side effects, if present, are generally mild and include nausea, sleepiness and dry mouth. • Not recommended for pregnant or breastfeeding mothers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral • Oral dissolving tablet 	Prescription only

Type of Treatment	Benefits	Drawbacks	Delivery Methods	OTC/ Prescription
Ditans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good for patients with a history of heart disease, stroke, or other medical conditions that increase their risk for heart attacks or stroke • Can sometimes be useful for patients who do not respond to triptans or have side effects from triptans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Side effects include dizziness and sleepiness. • No driving for eight hours after taking a dose. • Not recommended for pregnant or breastfeeding mothers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral 	Prescription only
Anti-nausea medications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available as a prescription or over-the-counter • Help relieve nausea and vomiting as well as other symptoms of a migraine attack • Some help stop the migraine attack • Some available as a patch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often cause sleepiness as a side effect • Rare short-term and long-term side effects, which include muscle spasms • May cause abnormal movements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral • Oral dissolving tablet • Injection • Suppository 	Prescription and over-the-counter
Dihydroergotamine (DHE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower risk of medication overuse headache • Low rates of returning migraine attack within 24 hours after relief from the initial attack • Good for people who wake up with migraine, have menstrual migraine, allodynia or severe and/or prolonged migraine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not recommended during pregnancy • Not recommended for people with a history of heart disease, severe peripheral vascular disease or uncontrolled high blood pressure • Not effective for hemiplegic migraine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nasal spray • Injection • Intravenous infusion 	Prescription only

