

Are migraines eating away at your life?



Migraine attacks are accompanied by a throbbing pain either on one or both sides of the head. Unlike a regular headache, the consequences of a migraine is likely to seep into and impact all areas of our lives. Sunway Medical Centre (SMC) Consultant Neurologist Dr. Raymond Tan, based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, has said that migraines are as incapacitating neurological disorder, and comes with a wide range of symptoms including blurred vision, nausea, and vomiting.

People who suffer from migraines may be sensitive to lights, noises, and scents, and — for some, experience aura or focal neurologic symptoms; episodes as such can last between 4 to 72 hours in duration.

According to the Office on Women’s Health, migraine is three times more common in women than in men, and is the fourth leading cause of disability in women.

Dr. Sharmina Kamal, SMC Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, revealed that this is largely due to specific changes in the hormone oestrogen: “Oestrogen helps regulate the female reproductive system and controls chemicals in the brain that impact the sensation of pain. Therefore, a drop in oestrogen levels can contribute to the development of chronic headaches or migraines.”

Still, migraines can affect both men and women, from all walks of life.

In childhood, migraines are more prevalent in males but cedes once the influence of oestrogen begins – that is when the prevalence starts to rise in females, contributing to more common, longer-lasting migraines in women between the ages of 20 and 45. Besides hormonal changes, factors such as stress, lack of or too much sleep, skipped meals, weather changes, alcohol, and caffeine can also trigger migraines.

Fortunately, migraines are a modifiable disorder and there is hope for relief through very simple methods.

“The best thing to do at the start of a migraine is to stop your activity and get some rest, preferably in a quiet and dim lit room or area. Taking a simple analgesic like paracetamol at the start of the migraine often helps to limit the severity. Application of topical menthol may also lessen the intensity of acute migraines, although this is best avoided in women who are pregnant or breastfeeding,” suggested Dr. Raymond.

Combining therapy or medication with behavioural measures and a lifestyle that promotes overall good health is also a proven way to handle migraine attacks. For example, maintaining a healthy lifestyle includes consuming nutritious foods, as well as ensuring adequate hydration, frequent exercise, and proper sleep.

You can also speak to your physician about daily vitamins or supplements, such as vitamin B or magnesium.

Migraines are a real source of pain, but most of the time, they are not signs that one has a serious medical problem. However, it is worth speaking to your doctor when you have symptoms that are more severe than normal, including:

- Uncontrollable vomiting
- Loss of consciousness
- Seizures or convulsions
- Blurred vision or other vision changes
- Loss of balance or coordination

“Occasionally, the migraine attacks persist for more than 72 hours and become debilitating and resistant to conventional treatment. And in cases associated with persistent vomiting, this could lead to potential dehydration and its associated problems, which could require hospitalisation with intravenous fluids and medications,” Dr Raymond said.

Young women, in particular, who experience migraines with aura, especially those who smoke or use oral contraceptives, have an increased incidence of strokes and seizures. It is advisable for women at risk to avoid smoking and choose other forms of contraception, if possible.

As a close, you should know and avoid your triggers, treat symptoms early, and find medications or therapies that work best to relieve your migraine pain. When it comes to treating migraines, timing is everything – waiting too long to address your migraine symptoms or take preventive steps can increase how often and severely a migraine strikes.