

Migraine attack triggers

A trigger is something that happens to you, or something that you do, which seems to result in you having a migraine attack.

The migraine attack may start anywhere between six hours and two days after the trigger happens.

How to identify triggers

If you have migraine, almost anything can be a trigger. This means it can be very difficult to identify your potential triggers. It may also be a combination of a few things, like feeling stressed and skipping meals, which seems to lead to a migraine attack. And a trigger may not lead to a migraine attack every time, which can confuse things even more.

We know that the brain of someone with migraine likes balance, such as regular sleep and meals, so missing out on these can be a trigger. But the evidence for other possible triggers, such as certain foods and additives, is less certain.

It can sometimes be difficult to tell if something is really a trigger, or if what you're experiencing is an early symptom of a migraine attack. For instance, if craving sweet food is one of your early symptoms and you eat some chocolate before the attack moves into the next stage, you might think chocolate is a trigger. Our factsheet on stages of an attack outlines possible early symptoms.

Keeping a 'migraine diary' may help you find out what might be triggering attacks, make you more alert to warning signs and see if avoiding something makes a difference.

You should try to record:

- what time you wake up and what time you go to sleep
- the things you do (going to work, watching TV)



- where you are (the environment around you may contain triggers such as lighting or the temperature of a room)
- what you eat and drink and when
- when you have bowel movements
- what exercise or travel you do
- what your mood is like
- what the weather is like
- your menstrual cycle (for women)
- when a migraine attack or other headache starts, how painful it is and what other symptoms you have
- what medicines you take to try to ease the pain, and how much you take.

Are there typical triggers?

There are many possible migraine attack triggers. Common ones include:



- Changes in routine, such as too much or too little sleep, or going on a long journey or on holiday
- Stress and other heightened emotions such as anxiety, excitement, tension and shock
- Too much caffeine (in tea, coffee, cola, chocolate and some painkillers) or cutting it out suddenly
- The environment around you, such as high altitude, changes in the weather and high humidity
- Prolonged or sudden loud noises, such as busy areas or sirens
- Glare from the sun and bright, flickering or flashing lights (such as car headlights), fluorescent lights and LED/LCD lights
- Sitting at a computer for a long time, especially in an uncomfortable position so your head, neck and shoulder muscles tense up
- What you eat, when and how much, including food containing certain chemicals or additives such as tyramine (found in red wine and soft cheeses), monosodium glutamate (a flavour enhancer added to Chinese food and processed meats), nitrates (which occur naturally in vegetables and other food) and aspartame, an artificial sweetener.
- Alcohol, even small amounts or just certain types
- Low blood sugar levels, for example from skipping meals or exercising without eating enough food beforehand
- Gluten sensitivity
- Drugs, particularly cocaine, including trying to stop taking it regularly
- Sudden vigorous exercise, particularly if you don't normally do much exercise

- Teeth grinding
- Head injuries
- Coughing a lot

How can you avoid triggers?



If the trigger of your migraine attacks is a single thing, it may be simple to avoid. Practical steps might include wearing ear defenders in a noisy environment and sitting comfortably, using an anti-glare screen and taking regular breaks when using a computer.

It can be harder to avoid multiple triggers, especially if this means changing your lifestyle or breaking your normal routine and other people are involved. Major changes take time, effort and support.

Avoiding triggers may reduce the frequency of attacks but not stop them altogether. Many people need to use additional methods to control their migraine and you should talk to your doctor about these.

General improvements in your lifestyle can mean that you are more able to cope with migraine attacks, as you are healthier and fitter. Studies also suggest exercise stimulates the body to release natural painkillers.

Many people with migraine find that if they miss a meal, this can trigger a migraine attack. It is important that you follow a healthy, balanced diet with lots of fruit and vegetables and eat regularly.

If your migraine attacks appear to be triggered or made worse by having low blood sugar levels, frequent small nutritious snacks may help. You should drink at least eight glasses of water a day, on top of any other drinks, to avoid dehydration.

The Migraine Trust can be contacted on **0808 802 0066** (Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm) or through our contact form and Live chat service found on our website at **migrainetrust.org** or by emailing **info@migrainetrust.org**.



Patient Information Forum

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