

# What is Migraine?

One in seven people in the UK gets migraine, a complex, severe and painful longterm health condition.

Migraine attacks affect the whole body and can stop you functioning normally. Your experience of migraine will be unique to you, but common symptoms include head pain, problems with your sight, being very sensitive to light, sounds and smells, fatigue, and feeling and being sick.

## What causes migraine?

It is still not known why people get migraine. Scientists and doctors think it is the result of abnormal brain activity affecting nerve signals, chemicals and blood vessels in the brain. We don't know what causes this brain activity, although for up to 60% of people with migraine there is a possible link to their genes, making them more sensitive to changes in their environment. That's why migraine often runs in families.

Although migraine involves the brain, it is not believed to cause brain damage or stroke. These are more likely linked to lifestyle factors that can increase risk in anyone, such as high blood pressure, being overweight and smoking.



## Who gets migraine?

Over a billion people worldwide get migraine, including over 10 million in the UK. Migraine is the third most common disease in the world (behind tooth decay and tension-type headache).

People can get migraine at any age. It often starts at puberty, and it usually peaks between the ages of 35 and 45.

It is initially more common in boys than girls but this reverses around puberty, with migraine affecting three times as many women as men.

Children can get migraine. It can take longer to identify the condition in children, as migraine symptoms are different in children and adults. Four in 100 children have abdominal migraine that affects their stomach rather than their head. This usually stops as they get older, but they may then develop migraine headaches.



## Different types of migraine

There are different types of migraine and headache. Telling the difference between them can be hard. If you have migraine, you may also experience other types of headache, including headaches linked to exercise, stress and overuse of painkillers and other medication.

Doctors use a classification system to diagnose and treat different types of migraine effectively. The most common types fall into two categories:

- migraine without aura
- migraine with aura.

About one in three people with migraine have migraine with aura. Aura is the result of an electrical wave of nerve activity that spreads over the brain and develops into reversible neurological symptoms that warn of a migraine attack.

These and other symptoms you might experience are explained in our factsheet on the stages of a migraine attack.

Migraine can also be classed as episodic, which means you get a headache on fewer than 15 days a month. Chronic migraine is defined as having headache on at least 15 days per month, with eight of these having migraine symptoms, for at least three months.



## How does it affect people?

It can be difficult to live with a condition that is very painful and means you can't function normally – but is often dismissed as 'just a headache'. Our website and helpline offer advice and support on managing migraine, including at work [migrainetrust.org](https://migrainetrust.org)

It's estimated that 190,000 migraine attacks occur every day in the UK. Over three quarters of people who get migraine have at least one attack each month. These can last between four hours and three days.

We know that people with migraine feel it had a significant impact on their relationship with their partner or spouse and it can also significantly affect people's mental health.

Our factsheet on migraine triggers explains what can sometimes prompt a migraine attack, such as changes in your routine and sleeping patterns, stress and skipping meals.



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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](https://migrainetrust.org) or by emailing [info@migrainetrust.org](mailto:info@migrainetrust.org).



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