

# Stages of a Migraine attack

It can be difficult to know when a migraine attack is going to happen. However, you can often tell the pattern of each attack as there are well defined stages with different symptoms.

It is these stages and their different symptoms that distinguish a migraine from a headache.

In adults a migraine attack usually has four or five stages that lead on from each other and can overlap. You might get one, all, or a combination of these stages, and this may vary from attack to attack.

Each stage can vary in how long and how bad it is. Recognising different symptoms at different times during your attack can give your doctor helpful information and aid diagnosis. It can also help you decide when to take medication that could stop or shorten an attack.

## Premonitory stage

This is sometimes described as the 'warning stage' and can last up to 24 hours.

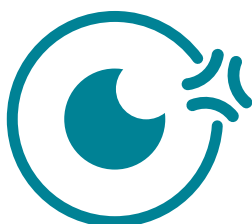
You may:

- feel tired and yawn a lot
- crave certain food
- feel thirsty
- pass more urine (wee)
- have a stiff neck
- find your mood changes – you could feel down or irritable.



## Aura stage

One in four people with migraine experience this stage. Aura is the result of an electrical wave of nerve activity that spreads over the brain.



This develops into a range of reversible neurological symptoms that give further warning of a migraine attack.

Symptoms can include:

- changes in sight (visual disturbances) such as dark spots, coloured spots, sparkles or 'stars', and zigzag lines
- numbness or pins and needles
- weakness
- dizziness or vertigo (sensation of spinning and poor balance)
- changes in speech and hearing
- memory changes
- feelings of fear and confusion.
- partial paralysis or fainting (but this is less common).

The aura stage can last from five to 60 minutes. In adults it usually happens before the headache stage.

## Headache stage

This is the main attack. It involves moderate to severe head pain that is typically throbbing and made worse by movement. It is usually on one side of the head, especially at the start of an attack, but you may get pain on both sides or all over your head.



As well as the headache, you may feel or be sick. You may be sensitive to light, sound, smell and movement. Painkillers work best when taken early in this stage.

## Resolution stage

Most attacks slowly fade away, but some stop suddenly after you are sick or cry a lot. Sleep seems to help even an hour or two can be enough to end an attack.

## Recovery (or 'postdrome') stage

This is the final stage. It can take hours or days for a drained, fatigued or 'hangover' type feeling to disappear.

Symptoms can be similar to those of the first warning stage or mirror them. For example, if you lost your appetite at the beginning of the attack, you might be very hungry now. If you were tired, you might feel full of energy.

## Stages of an attack in children

Migraine attacks in children are often much shorter. Many children find that sleeping for just a few minutes can stop their attack. It may be easier to tell the different stages in a child. They may experience the aura stage at the same time as the headache. Abdominal migraine is quite a common condition that affects four in 100 children and also some adults.



Children usually stop getting abdominal migraine by the time they grow up, but often develop migraine headache later in life.

Symptoms of abdominal migraine can include regular attacks of moderate to severe stomach pain that last from two to 72 hours, feeling sick and vomiting during attacks, with no headache during attacks.

## Preparing for an attack

Being aware of the different stages can help you prepare for a migraine attack. You might want to adapt your usual activities to cope with it.



It is useful to have a 'rescue treatment' plan for when attacks occur. This may include painkillers and anti-sickness medication. Our factsheet on acute medication gives more details of what's available.

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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