

**Questions and Answers session
Galway seminar,
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Panel

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Ethna Mitten, Specialist Migraine Nurse, Cork Migraine and Headache Clinic
Audrey Craven, President Migraine Association of Ireland

Can anything be done if your migraine is hormonal other than avoiding triggers?

Audrey Craven

As far as I know, it seems to be that the hormonal fluctuations cause the problem and I know in my own case that at period time, that is the time that you don't take on extra work, you don't have the late night, you don't skip the meal, you don't have the extra glass of wine, which is really avoiding the triggers. You might just about get away with it at other times but you certainly won't at period times or at times just prior to that. Be extra vigilant at that time and carry your medication on your person at that particular time. And make sure you have a bottle of water with you in your handbag or in your car.

Is migraine associated with chronic fatigue syndrome?

Ethna Mitten

Migraine is certainly associated with fatigue in the aftermath of an attack. People may yawn and feel tired before an attack but definitely feel tired and washed out after the attack. But that would be quite acute because the next day you can feel absolutely normal. I'm not aware of a direct link between migraine and Chronic fatigue syndrome however.

Are there any dangers of taking 6-8 doses of Imigran Nasal spray per month?

Ethna Mitten

The recommended dosage is about 6 doses per month and one shouldn't go above that really.

Is there any truth in the connection between migraine and the hole in the heart?

Tim Counihan

There's a very interesting study on this at the moment. There were a number of anecdotal stories and then there was an actual study. Other experts have taken issue

with the results. One of the difficulties is that both migraine and hole in the heart are very common. Many people have a hole in the heart and they are not aware of it. Another difficulty is that the treatment for the hole in the heart is very invasive and potentially dangerous and until such time as either a definitive connection has been established I wouldn't suggest that people should embark on that kind of treatment.

Is Botox a good option for migraine?

Tim Counihan

It is an option. Botox is botulinum toxin, it works by not paralysing muscles but by weakening muscles. It is certainly an option for tension-type headache and there are experts who have used it for migraine. It would still be considered experimental. It involves multiple injections across the head that are a little bit uncomfortable. There have been reports of people actually losing their hair following botox. There are selective patients for whom it has been useful.

Are patients with migraine more likely to get a stroke?

Tim Counihan

There is a definite and clear-cut association between patients who have migraine with aura, who are smoking and taking the birth control pill. Many GPs won't prescribe the pill in patients who are smoking to begin with, and definitely migraine with aura combined with smoking and taking the pill is a well-recognised risk of stroke. In the absence of that there is probably no increased risk of stroke. There was at one time a concern that use of the triptans might be associated with stroke or even of heart attacks. I think in reality that has never been borne out.

What does the panel think of feverfew for migraine?

Tim Counihan

Feverfew was commonly prescribed in the United States as part of a package. My own experience of it has been a bit disappointing and the general consensus is that it doesn't work.

Audrey Craven

It is not suitable for pregnant women or if you are lactating. Some people find that it can help, especially in capsule form or if eaten as a leaf. Beware though that you can get mouth ulcers if you chew the plant.

Can stress from homework cause migraine?

Ethna Mitten

Yes, any kind of stress can bring about migraine. I think for schoolchildren and adults time management is vital so that during school time, they don't miss lunch, they don't skip meals etc. When they come in from school it is important that they have time for rest and that they don't go straight into homework. Time management is important. They shouldn't put strain on themselves to try and get it done in a restrictive or pressurised time. I would suggest that is probably the best thing to do.

How long should paralysis last for those with migraine?

Tim Counihan

In my view it would be very unusual for paralysis to last for longer than two days. If it does then that would need to be investigated. In general, in people who develop paralysis at the start of their migraine attack, it shouldn't really last for more than an hour or so. There are exceptions to that rule. This is a form of migraine called Familial Hemiplegic Migraine that runs very strongly in families, predominantly inherited. If you have it then there is a 50% chance that your child will get it. So to answer this person, it is very unusual for paralysis to last more than two days, particularly when there are other members of the family with whom the paralysis does not last that length of time.

I'm 17, how long can I continue to take Epilim and are there side effects for young males?

Tim Counihan

One of the most common side effects is weight gain and that can be a serious side effect over time. Otherwise in young men it is reasonably well tolerated. There would be no definite time you would need to be on it. I usually recommend a patient to stay on a medication for at least three months, maybe six months depending on how you are doing or if the medication works. If it does work, stay headache free for at least three months, at least you have the option to come off the drug and see what happens.

Is it correct to diagnose a migraine headache without an aura?

Audrey Craven

Yes. There is migraine with aura and migraine without aura. About 80% of people don't have aura at all. Just because you don't have aura doesn't mean you don't have migraine. Maybe that has been confusing in the past for people. So yes you can have migraine without aura and it is still a migraine attack. Getting the diagnosis right is hugely important and I hope that has been addressed at today's meeting

What is the most suitable medication for children?

Ethna Mitten

Dr Counihan suggested earlier that Sanomigran as a preventative therapy would be one of the best. Obviously in children, the medication dosage will change over time. You need to discuss this with your doctor. In terms of acute treatments, Paracetamol and Calpol can be used when they get the headache.

Audrey Craven

Very often children get migraine when they are playing sport without enough fluid intake and if your child is in that category, they should bring a bar of glucose in their sports bag. When the blood sugar levels drop, that's quite a good coping mechanism.

Ethna Mitten

Just on the diet topic, it is very important that children do not miss their meals. Also, lying down in a dark room, taking Calpol, Paracetamol or putting the cold pack on the head, might help. Sleep is a great cure for the migraine attack.

What is the difference between cluster headache and migraine?

Tim Counihan

Cluster headache tends to affect men more than women, it is generally a shorter lasting headache though it can occur as the name implies in clusters. Each individual headache will last no longer than about an hour and a half. It typically awakens people out of their sleep as opposed to the beneficial effects sleep has on migraine. Whereas the cluster patient will typically go to bed and about two hours into their sleep they'll be awoken by sudden severe one-sided pain, the migraine patient likes to take refuge in a darkened room. The cluster patient is the one who is banging his head against the wall, pacing around trying to get relief and they are very different. Alcohol is a notorious precipitant for cluster headache and patients with cluster absolutely have to quit alcohol.

Can anti-convulsants be prescribed by GPs?

Tim Counihan: Yes, definitely.

Once my visual disturbance begins, my nausea stops. When I then take Aspirin, unfortunately it doesn't get rid of the headache. Any advice?

Ethna Mitten

This is all to do with the management of the migraine attack, that when you have visual disturbance, there isn't a medical treatment really that will stop it. Aspirin or

Triptans, the specific migraine drugs have no effect on the aura. For the nausea it is important to take Motillium if you are having nausea, then not to take the triptan or aspirin until you actually have the headache. Some patients actually take the triptan when they have the visual disturbance. Really one should not do that, you should wait until the headache starts.

Do you recommend beta-blockers?

Tim Counihan

Beta-blockers are certainly useful for some people. They used to be the standard preventative medicine. They are usually used to treat blood pressure. They tend to make people tired or fatigued and they do of course lower blood pressure. Some people can't tolerate them and they are not to be given to people with asthma or people who have active depression. In recent years thinking has moved away a little bit from beta-blockers though.

What are the treatments for chronic daily headache?

Tim Counihan

I think this is a big problem for many patients who are getting headaches everyday or for most of the month. It's most important for people to find out the underlying primary headache syndrome. Many people will start out with episodic headaches and eventually if it is not treated properly, they will develop a daily headache. Often you have to go right back to the beginning and ask what were the headaches like when you first got them. If I have a patient who has chronic daily headache, I will discourage them using triptans all the time, not least because of the expense. They are also of course dangerous if you use them excessively. Doctors also need to make sure the patient is not using large numbers of analgesics which are contributing to the headache itself. Patients need to eliminate these as they may be making it worse. Most patients will require some kind of preventative and then a course of a strong anti-inflammatory medications, sometimes steroids. Some patients have to be admitted to the hospital so that they are taken off medications that might be making them worse. Dehydration is very common cause of chronic low-grade headache. In these cases, re-hydration, adequate amounts of analgesics and then a preventative works for many people, but it sometimes does require admission to hospital.

Look out also for the triggers that may have precipitated the chronic headache. Many patients with any chronic pain syndrome may get depressed and may require a multi-disciplinary approach to treatment. Psychological is often very much part and parcel of the treatment of Chronic headache.

Is frovex safe to take every month for menstrual migraine?

Ethna Mitten

Yes, frovex is particularly useful for people who have longer migraine attacks. When frovex works well, you might not need a preventative. Having your frovex with you is the key. If you are at work or out somewhere and it's home in the cupboard then it is too late. You need to have it with you.

My headache is one-sided and throbbing, I get a very stiff neck and vertigo. It stays with me all day, does it sound like migraine?

Tim Counihan

Well it's difficult to be entirely sure. It might be occipital neuralgia disorder where the nerve at the back of the neck becomes inflamed and people get this very sensitive back of the head usually behind the level of the ear. It often wakens you from sleep because very often your head is turning and there is a lot of sensitivity and neck pain with it. Certainly the description could be migraine but I would certainly consider occipital neuralgia. Sometimes injections in around the nerve at the back is curative.