Migraines can be debilitating

Migraines occur on a spectrum of mild to very severe headaches. They are diagnosed by a characteristic pattern, your past history and a family history of migraines.

Migraines can last from a few hours up to days.

Women get migraines more than men and they affect 1 in 10 people overall. Frequency and severity will decrease with age.

Migraines do not usually indicate more serious underlying illness.

Why do I get migraines?

What causes migraines is not fully understood but it is related to changes in blood vessels. Doctors may refer to them as vascular headaches.

A number of chemicals or triggers can cause these blood vessel changes. Some possible triggers for your migraine include:

- Alcohol, particularly red wine
- Chocolate, coffee, cheese, some food preservatives
- Starvation
- Volatile agents such as petrol, body sprays, cleaning fluids
- Exercise, excitement, relaxation or fatigue
- Hormones, periods or menopause
- Medication
- Environmental triggers such as bright or flickering lights, noise, televisions, computers

They often have a pattern and can occur sporadically or frequently. They can be very debilitating for some people. A precipitant is not always found or known.

What are the symptoms?

Migraine pain typically starts on one side or the other and can spread over the whole head. It is usually worse with movement. Associated symptoms such as nausea, sensitivity to bright lights and noise are common.

The pain has a throbbing nature and your head may feel tight or squeezed. It is usually worse with movement.

A number of people get an aura or sensations before the headache including:

- Shimmering lights
- Blurred vision
- Numbness or tingling
- Strange smells
- Nausea or vomiting

In the hospital

If this is your first migraine or your treatment at home has failed, various strategies will be tried by your doctor. As a rule, starting treatment as early as possible with your medications is the key.

If your symptoms are mild and/or early then you may be given simple painkillers such as aspirin, nurofen and paracetamol plus anti nausea medications such as maxolon. If you have a drug allergy you must tell your doctor or nurse immediately.

Stronger treatments used in the hospital involve various medications and intravenous fluids. Largactil (chlorpromazine) has been shown to be most effective given by various strategies with IV fluids.

Narcotic medications such as morphine and pethidine are no longer used for migraine treatment as other, more effective medications are available.

If you are having a typical or usual migraine further investigations are often not necessary. If your headache has suspicious elements then tests may be done.
If you get another migraine

Take any medication you have been prescribed straight away as it will work best if taken early.

If you don't have medication prescribed you should take paracetamol (2 tablets for an adult) and nurofen (400mg for an adult). You should:

- Stop work
- Lie down in a dark room
- Don’t read a book or watch the television
- Avoid stimulation
- Avoid alcohol, tea, coffee, orange juice and foods such as chocolate, cheese.

Are they doing me harm?

Most migraines are treated by patients themselves at home and resolve completely. Even severe migraines do not cause permanent damage. They can have significant impact on your life though and if that is the case you should seek help from a specialist which your GP can refer you to.

Note: If possible identify what precipitates your migraine and try and avoid it, use medications early if you are going to do this and speak to your doctor if your headache is different.

Instructions:

- If you have any weakness or feel faint then you should consult your doctor or call an ambulance
- If your headache was sudden in onset or out of the blue then you should go to the Emergency Department immediately
- If your headache is very different from your usual migraine then you should consult your doctor
- If you have persistent strange feelings other than your usual aura then consult your doctor
- Any significant symptom may be as a result of your migraine but could indicate something serious. If you are not sure, ask your doctor.

When should I worry?

Seeking help:

In a medical emergency go to your nearest emergency department or call 000.

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Always consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.