The exact cause of migraine headaches is unknown. Current research suggests that inflammation in the blood vessels of the brain causes them to swell and press on nearby nerves, causing pain. This inflammation may arise in or be stimulated by signals from the trigeminal nerve (the main sensory nerve of the face).

Many individuals with migraine headaches can identify triggers that cause or aggravate the headache. Because there is no cure, avoiding triggers may help to reduce the frequency or severity of migraine headaches. Some triggers include

- Stress and anxiety
- Changes in the weather
- Caffeine (too much or too little), chocolate, or alcohol (often red wine)
- Lack of sleep or too much sleep
- Hormonal changes during the menstrual cycle
- Skipped meals
- Certain foods that contain nitrates (such as luncheon meats, hot dogs), tyramine (such as aged cheeses, smoked fish), monosodium glutamate (MSG), or aspartame

There are 2 medication strategies used to treat migraine headaches. Treating the pain at the onset offers the best relief.

- Over-the-counter analgesics (pain relievers) such as aspirin, acetaminophen, or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS) such as ibuprofen
- Prescription drugs called triptans are used for headaches not relieved by over-the-counter medications. These are generally not used for people who have high blood pressure or heart disease.

For those whose headaches are not adequately relieved with these medications, the second medication strategy involves medications prescribed prophylactically (taken everyday for prevention). These medications are normally prescribed to treat other disorders but have been successful at reducing the frequency or severity of migraine headaches.

- Blood pressure medications such as beta blockers or calcium channel blockers
- Antidepressant medications such as amitriptyline or venlafaxine
- Anticonvulsant medications such as divalproex or topiramate

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

- National Institute of Neurological Diseases
- US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Women’s Health
  [www.womenshealth.gov/faq/migraine.pdf](http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/migraine.pdf)

To find this and other JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on JAMA’s Web site at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com). Many are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on vasculitis was published in the August 8, 2007, issue.