

Menstrual Headaches

The term menstrual headache refers to any headache that reliably occurs around the time of menses. Approximately 60% of women who suffer from migraine headaches experience more frequent or more severe headaches with menses. These are referred to as menstrual-related migraines. A smaller proportion of women experience true “menstrual migraines”; migraines that occur only at the time of menses in at least two-thirds of cycles. These headaches typically onset from two days before to three days after the start of menstrual bleeding.

Menstrual migraines are believed to be triggered by the drop in estrogen level that occurs just before menses. Consequently, many of the preventative treatments for menstrual migraines aim to stabilize estrogen levels.

Treatment options for menstrual migraines fall into two categories: acute treatment for headaches as they occur and preventative regimens.

Acute treatments: Overall, all medications for migraine headaches are more likely to be effective if taken soon after headache onset.

1. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications - Naproxen 550mg or Ibuprofen 600 mg - 800 mg. Those with stomach problems or kidney disease should use these medications with caution.
2. Acetaminophen 650 mg - 1000mg
3. “Triptans” - These are medications indicated specifically for migraine headaches available by prescription. Triptans come in pill, injection, and nasal spray forms.

Preventative treatments:

1. Extended cycle oral contraceptive pill regimens. These regimens contain a week of hormone-free pills after eleven weeks of hormonal pills (in contrast to the standard three weeks of hormonal pills followed by one week of hormone-free pills).
2. Standard oral contraceptive pill regimens with added estrogen (by pill or patch) during the hormone-free pill week.
3. Supplemental estrogen by pill, patch, or gel started two to three days before the onset of bleeding and continued for seven days.
4. Naproxen twice daily started seven days before estimated onset of menses.
5. “Triptan” two to three times daily starting two to three days before onset of menses.
6. Magnesium supplements started mid-cycle.

If you think that you are experiencing menstrual migraines talk with your physician about what treatment approach is most appropriate for you.