

Cluster headache sufferers tend to report their pain as being the worst imaginable, and these are often considered the nastiest of the primary headache disorders. Although not a very common type of headache, approximately 1 in 1000 people suffer from them, they are severe, and the pain is enough to make some cluster headache sufferers feel suicidal.

Cluster headaches are a series of relatively short but extremely painful headaches experienced daily for weeks or months at a given time. They tend to happen at the same time each year. Traditionally they were far more common in men, a ratio of males to females of 8:1, however there has been an increase in women with the ratio dropping to 2:1. Cluster headaches may disappear completely (go into 'remission') for months or years, but they can come back without any warning.

WHAT IS HAPPENING?

It's not understood exactly what causes them, but a nerve in your face is involved, creating intense pain around one of your eyes. The nerve signal seems to come from a deeper part of the brain called the hypothalamus, where the 'internal biological clock' that controls your sleep and wake cycles lives.

Attacks appear to be linked to the circadian rhythm, your body's 24-hour clock. They happen so regularly, generally at the same time each day, that they've been called "alarm clock headaches." One will often wake you up an hour or two after going to bed. Night time attacks can be more severe than the day time ones.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

- Rapid pain onset reaching full force within 5 or 10 minutes
- Normally short-lived 15 – 90 minutes, sometimes last up to 3 hours
- One headache a day, in some up to three a day
- Always one-sided, same side
- Burning or piercing
- Throbbing or constant
- Pain can spread to your forehead, temple, nose, cheek, or upper gum on that side

Cluster Headache

- Scalp can feel tender
- Ipsilateral (same side as headache) drooping eyelid, tearing watery eye, swelling of eyelid
- Nasal congestion or runny nose
- Facial sweating
- Agitation, pacing.

HOW ARE THEY DIAGNOSED?

There is no specific test that identifies cluster headaches. Your diagnosis will be made based on the interpretation of your symptoms and how you respond to different treatments. You may be referred to a neurologist who will clarify your diagnosis and prescribe appropriate medication. Unfortunately X-rays, CT-scans and MRIs are not diagnostic of cluster headaches.

ARE THERE WARNING SIGNS?

Although the pain starts suddenly, you may experience a few subtle cues of a looming headache:

- Discomfort or a mild burning sensation around the eye
- Swollen or drooping eye
- Smaller pupil in the eye
- Eye redness or watering
- Runny or congested nose
- Red, warm face
- Begin to sweat a lot, or light may bother you.

HOW CAN IT BE TREATED?

There's no cure for cluster headaches. The goal of treatment is to decrease the severity of pain, shorten the headache period and prevent the attacks.

Due to the nature of cluster headaches, fast-acting medication is required. The most successful ways to treat the pain are a shot of Triptans (drug) and breathing oxygen through a face mask for 20 minutes. There is a range of drugs that are used to reduce the pain as well as lessen the intensity and duration of the

attack. Your doctor can prescribe this medication to you as well as preventative medicine.

In extreme cases surgical procedures can be done to block the trigeminal or occipital nerve involved, or implant electrodes to interfere in the nerve transmission. These procedures are very rare as they are considered high risk with potentially serious side effects/consequences. There is more

research underway involving surgical procedures and in the future better options may become available for people that don't respond to medication.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Living with cluster headaches can be frightening and difficult. The attacks can seem unbearable and make you feel anxious and depressed. Ultimately, they can affect your relationships, your work and the quality of your life.

Be aware of possible causes or triggers which you could avoid, including:

- Cigarette smoke
- Alcohol
- Weather changes
- Strong smells
- Bright or flashing lights
- Hot showers

The following tips may help you avoid or better cope with an attack during a cluster cycle:

- Stick to a regular sleep schedule. Cluster periods can begin when there are changes in your normal sleep routine.
- Melatonin has shown modest effectiveness in treating night time attacks.
- Join a headache support group
- Have regular massage. Although massage may not relieve or change the pattern or intensity of your cluster headaches, during a headache cycle be it weeks or months the anxiety and stress can be severe. Massage may help you relax and relieve some stress allowing you to better cope during this difficult time.

The information contained in this article is intended as general guidance and information only and should not be relied upon as a basis for planning individual medical care or as a substitute for specialist medical advice in each individual case. ©Co-Kinetic 2018