

MANAGING YOUR MIGRAINE

Calgary clinic offers innovative approach to controlling headache pain

First came the pain down her back and spine. Then came the headaches-excruciating migraine headaches that left her incapacitated and unable to work.

It was, without question, one of the most difficult periods in the Calgary woman’s life. “I think what you end up with is an invisible disability,” says Dawson, reflecting on what it is like to suffer migraine headaches. “Even just people talking in a meeting, it’s like every syllable is a knife going into your head and you just want to dim the lights.”

Fortunately, Dawson was able to get help. Calgary is home to a clinic that is breaking new ground in the research and treatment of migraine headaches. Located at the Foothills Medical Centre, the Calgary Headache Assessment and Management Program (CHAMP) is pioneering a unique health-care delivery model that is helping migraine sufferers like Dawson regain control over their lives.

Key to the clinic’s approach is a team-based, share-care delivery model. Established in 2003, the clinic draws on the expertise of neurologists, psychologists, occupational therapists, nurses and support staff to help patients deal with migraines.

Migraine makers

Migraine headache triggers can include:

Hormonal changes: Although the exact relationship between hormones and headaches isn’t clear, fluctuations in estrogen and progesterone seem to trigger headaches in many women with migraine headaches. Women with a history of migraines often have reported headaches immediately before or during their periods. In the majority of women, although not all, migraines improve during pregnancy. They may worsen in the peri-menopausal period, but for many, headaches improve after menopause. Hormonal medications, such as contraceptives and hormone replacement therapy, also may worsen migraines.

Foods: Certain foods appear to trigger headaches in some people. Common offenders include alcohol, especially beer and red wine; aged cheeses; chocolate; fermented, pickled or marinated foods; aspartame; caffeine; monosodium glutamate – a key ingredient in some Asian foods; certain seasonings; and many canned and processed foods. Skipping meals or fasting also can trigger migraines.

Stress: A period of hard work followed by relaxation may lead to a weekend migraine headache. Stress at work or home also can instigate migraines. Sensory stimulus: Bright lights and sun glare can produce head pain. So can unusual smells — including pleasant scents, such as perfume and flowers, and unpleasant odors, such as paint thinner and secondhand smoke.

Physical factors: Intense physical exertion, including sexual activity, may provoke migraines. Changes in sleep patterns — including too much or too little sleep — also can initiate a migraine headache.

Changes in the environment: A change of weather, season, altitude level, barometric pressure or time zone can prompt a migraine headache.

Medications and drugs: Certain medications can aggravate migraines. Caffeine withdrawal can be a powerful trigger in people who drink more than a cup or two of coffee per day.

Source: CHAMP

Migraine signs and symptoms

A typical migraine headache attack produces some or all of these signs and symptoms:

- Moderate to severe pain – many migraine headache sufferers feel pain on only one side of their head, while some experience pain on both sides
- Head pain with a pulsating or throbbing quality
- Pain that worsens with physical activity
- Pain that hinders your regular daily activities
- Nausea with or without vomiting
- Sensitivity to light and sound

When left untreated, a migraine headache typically lasts from four to 72 hours, but the frequency with which they occur can vary from person to person. You may have migraines several times a month or just once or twice a year. Migraine with aura sufferers may experience the following symptoms:

- Sparkling flashes of light
- Dazzling zigzag lines in your field of vision
- Slowly spreading blind spots in your vision
- Tingling, pins-and-needles sensations in one arm or leg
- Language and speech problems, or rarely, weakness on one side of the body

Whether or not you have auras, you may have one or more sensations of premonition several hours or a day or so before your headache actually strikes, including:

- Feelings of elation or intense energy
- Cravings for sweets
- Thirst
- Drowsiness
- Irritability or depression.

Calgary Headache Assessment & Management Program

For more information about the Calgary Headache Assessment & Management Program, please call 403-944-4249. Referrals to the CHAMP Clinic are accepted from family physicians and other physicians.

Referral criteria includes:

- Patients be at least 16 years of age;
- Patients have headaches that are causing significant interference with their activities.

Please fax referrals to 403-283-2270.

For more information on migraine headaches, visit:

- www.headachenetwork.ca

www.mayoclinic.com/health/migraineheadache/DS00120

To speak to a health professional, contact your family physician or speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling Calgary Health Link:

Calgary : 403-943-LINK(5465) Or toll-free: 1-866-408-LINK(5465)

Mandarin Health Link 943-1554, Cantonese Health Link 943-1556

Source: CHAMP and Mayo Clinic,

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