

PATIENT INFORMATION

Cluster Headache Treatment

Treatment is divided into treatments to stop (relieve) each headache, and treatments aimed at preventing the headaches.

Treating each headache

Ordinary painkillers do not work. Generally, if you take an ordinary painkiller, it takes too long to work, as the headache will usually have gone before the painkiller takes effect.

Sumatriptan injection: Sumatriptan, given by injection just under the skin, is the commonly used treatment to stop a headache. It relieves pain within 15 minutes in about three in four people with a cluster headache. You can be shown how to use this injection, and should use it as soon as a headache occurs.

Sumatriptan is a class of medicine called a triptan, more usually used to treat migraine. It is not a painkiller. Triptans work by interfering with a brain chemical called 5-HT. This chemical is thought to be involved in both migraine and cluster headaches.

Useful facts about sumatriptan injection:

- It works within 5-15 minutes to ease the headache in most affected people.
- The adult doses are a 3mg or 6 mg injection for each headache. The maximum dose in 24 hours is two 6 mg injections (12 mg) with a minimum gap of one hour between the two doses.
- Side-effects sometimes occur but, if they do, are generally mild and do not last long. They include feeling sick (nausea), dizziness, tiredness and dry mouth. A minority of people also develop a warm-hot sensation, tightness, tingling, flushing, and feelings of heaviness or pressure in the face, arms, legs and occasionally the chest.
- Some people should not take sumatriptan - for example, some people with heart disease, stroke disease or peripheral arterial disease.

Zolmitriptan nasal spray: zolmitriptan is also a triptan medicine. Zolmitriptan nasal spray is an alternative to sumatriptan injection. It often works well but possibly not as quickly as sumatriptan injection.

100% oxygen therapy: this is an alternative treatment that may be advised, especially if sumatriptan injections or zolmitriptan nasal spray cannot be used, or do not work. It often works well to relieve pain within 15 minutes, but it does not work in everybody. Its advantage, when it works, is that it can be used as often as necessary. The oxygen has to be 100% and so needs to be delivered, through a special mask, from an oxygen cylinder. Some people with cluster headaches have an oxygen cylinder and mask at home ready to treat an attack. Oxygen will need to be prescribed by your GP or Hospital Specialist and can be dangerous if users smoke.

100% oxygen treatment may not be suitable for people who also have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Preventing cluster headaches

Some medicines are used in an attempt to prevent cluster headaches. Most people with cluster headaches will be prescribed one. It is difficult to say exactly how well they work at reducing the frequency and/or severity of headaches. This is because there is a lack of large research trials which have studied these treatments. However, smaller research studies suggest that they do work for many people. The usual treatments to be used in this way are:

- Verapamil. This is the most commonly used treatment. It is a medicine that is normally used to treat heart problems. It is not clear how it works for cluster headaches. The doses used are often higher than those used for heart problems, and you will need heart tests such as an electrocardiogram (ECG) before starting or increasing to high doses.
- Topiramate: This is classed as an anticonvulsant and is usually used to prevent seizures of epilepsy. However, it has been reported to be useful in cluster headache.
- Corticosteroids are used in a short burst for two to three weeks in decreasing amounts as a first step to break the headache cycle. They are often used alongside other treatments which take longer to work. Corticosteroids are more effective for chronic cluster headache to break the cycle. If used for episodic cluster headache, when the medication is reduced the headaches come back.
- Once an effective preventative treatment has been found for an individual, this can be restarted when the next cluster period begins.

More Information:

See the patient information leaflet with your medicines for more information.

<https://patient.info/brain-nerves/headache-leaflet/cluster-headaches>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/cluster-headaches/>

<https://ouchuk.org/>

For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.