

PATIENT INFORMATION

Cluster Headache

What are cluster headaches?

Cluster headaches are attacks of severe pain in one side of the head, often around the eye. They begin quickly and without any warning. The attacks usually last between 15 minutes and three hours. They usually occur every day (up to eight times in a day) and continue for a variable time (often between one and three months) before improving. There may then be a long period of time before the headaches come back. The pain during an attack is usually severe. It can be so severe that you become agitated and unable to lie down. Some people even bang their head against the wall in frustration with the pain. Attacks often occur at night, a couple of hours after falling asleep, and will wake you from sleep.

During each attack you may also experience other symptoms. These include:

- Redness and watering of the eye and/or constriction of the pupil in the eye.
- A runny and bunged-up nose.
- Swelling or drooping of the eyelids.

Who gets cluster headaches?

Cluster headaches affect about 1 in 1,000 people. They are four times more likely to occur in men than in women. The first bout (cluster) typically develops between the ages of 20-40 years, but it can start at any age.

Triggers

Most cluster headaches occur for no apparent reason. However, some people find that something may trigger a headache. For example:

- Alcohol. Some people find that a headache often occurs within an hour or so of having an alcoholic drink.
- Being hot may be a trigger, such as exercising in a hot room, or having a hot bath.
- Strong-smelling substances, such as solvents, perfumes, petrol, etc.

How are cluster headaches diagnosed?

The diagnosis is based on the typical symptoms. There is no test that can prove the diagnosis. Tests are sometimes done if the diagnosis is not clear, to rule out other causes of headache.

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

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