

Headaches: Cluster Headaches



Cluster headaches are very painful. They happen on one side of the head and come in clusters, or cycles (also called cluster periods). A cluster period might last 1 month or longer. This type of headache often starts at night and can last for 30 minutes to several hours. You may have a stuffy nose and watery eyes during the headaches. The cause of cluster headaches is not known.

Most people who get cluster headaches have one or two cluster periods each year. After a cluster period ends, you may not get another headache for months or even years.

How are cluster headaches treated?

Cluster headaches are treated with medicine or oxygen therapy to help ease the pain or stop the headaches. You may also need to take medicine to help prevent more headaches or reduce how many you get during a cycle. These medicines can also make your headaches less severe.

It is also a good idea to try to avoid things that bring on a headache during a cluster cycle.

What can you do when you get a cluster headache?

When a cluster headache begins:

- Start your treatment right away. Do not wait for the headache to get worse. Take your medicine exactly as prescribed. If your doctor prescribed at-home oxygen therapy to stop a cluster headache, follow the directions for using it.
- Do what feels best. During a cluster cycle, you may be restless, agitated, or unable to sit still. You may feel better if you walk, jog in place, sit, kneel, or stand. Lying down may make the pain worse.
- Put ice or a cold pack on the painful area for 10 to 20 minutes at a time. Put a thin cloth between the ice and your skin. Applying steady pressure to the area may also help.
- Watch for new symptoms with a headache. These include fever, weakness or numbness, vision changes, or confusion. They may be signs of a more serious problem.
- Do not drive until you know how your cluster headache medicine affects you. Some medicines may make you drowsy or feel dizzy.

Carry medicine with you at all times so that you can quickly treat a cluster headache.

How can you limit cluster headaches?

You can't predict when a cycle of cluster headaches will start. But as soon as a cycle starts, you can take medicine to help stop the headaches. And during a cluster cycle, you can take medicine that may reduce how many headaches you get during that cycle. Tell your doctor if your headaches get worse and

medicines do not help. You may need to try a different medicine.

When you are in a cycle of cluster headaches, try to identify and avoid things that bring on your headaches. These are called triggers. By doing so, your headaches may not make you feel as bad or last as long.

Keep a headache diary

- Try to figure out what brings on your cluster headaches (triggers). Avoiding triggers may help you prevent them. In your diary, write down:
 - When a cluster cycle begins and how long it lasts.
 - When and how often the headaches happen and how severe they are. For example, you can note what the pain was like (piercing, burning, or sharp).
 - What you think might be causing them. Certain things may be more likely to cause a headache during a cycle, such as drinking alcohol, changing your normal sleep routine, and eating certain foods like aged cheeses (blue cheese, for example) and processed meats (bacon, for example). Medicines that contain nitrates or histamine may also be a headache trigger. In addition, raised body temperature may cause a headache. This can happen during exercise or if you take a hot bath.

Build healthy sleep habits

Regular sleep can help prevent a cycle of cluster headaches from starting. It is best if you go to bed and wake up at the same time every day. Do not take naps. If your cluster headaches tend to start during sleep, ask your doctor about taking a medicine before you go to sleep that can help prevent headaches at night.

Questions to ask your doctor

Use the space below to list your questions or concerns. Take this sheet with you to your next doctor visit.

Questions about cluster headaches: