

# Cluster Headache

Cluster headaches are recognized by their pattern of deep, intense head pain. This pain occurs in the same location and at the same time of day on a daily basis for weeks to months. The cluster can be followed by long periods of remission.

## CAUSE

The exact cause of cluster headache is not known. The *trigeminal nerve* (which is responsible for the sensation of pain in the face, amongst other things) and a deep portion of the carotid artery (supplying the brain) may be involved. The part of the brain called the hypothalamus may also play a role.

## SYMPTOMS

The pain of a cluster headache often feels like an ice pick in the eye. It is on one side only, deep, continuous, and excruciating. It tends to come on suddenly, typically at the same time each day, and may last 15 minutes to several hours. It most often affects middle-aged males, and most often happens in spring and fall. The eye on the affected side may tear excessively, be red, and have a droopy eyelid. Light may bother the eye. The nose may be stuffy or runny, and the skin may be sweaty or pale. The pain may be severe enough to cause nausea or vomiting.

## DIAGNOSIS

The diagnosis of cluster headache is made based on the description of typical symptoms. If the cluster headache is present during the examination, the person's appearance may suggest the diagnosis. Labs and x-ray tests do not help make the diagnosis, but may be requested to be sure other conditions are not present. Sometimes the response to treatment (especially to oxygen) may support the diagnosis.

## PROGNOSIS

Cluster headaches, unfortunately, are a lifelong problem.

## TREATMENT

- For cluster headache, treatment to stop an attack is difficult because there is usually no warning. The pain becomes intense almost immediately. Inhalation of 100% oxygen can help. Certain medications that constrict blood vessels in the brain also may help. These medications are available as injections, as inhaled preparations, or oral medicines. Finding a treatment that works may be a trial and error process.
- Treatment for pain of the headache is similar to other headache treatment. Anti-inflammatory medications may be helpful for some people. Narcotic pain medication is avoided because the daily occurrence of the headache may lead to side effects from the medication, especially narcotic withdrawal headache.
- Preventative treatment is also trial and error. A variety of medications, each with their own side effects, have proven helpful. You should have a detailed discussion about use of preventative medications with your caregiver.
- If nothing else works, you may be referred for a trial of nerve blocks, or for surgical treatments.

## HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- If you were given medications for pain, you will need to be driven home by a responsible adult.
- If your caregiver has prescribed medicine, take as directed.
- It is very important to keep any follow-up appointments or referrals provided by your caregiver.
- Avoid things that trigger attacks:
  - Smoking
  - Drinking alcohol
  - Daytime naps
  - Breathing in solvent vapors such as gasoline or paints for prolonged periods of time.
  - High altitude traveling including air travel.

- Take medications recommended by your caregiver before air travel to help prevent attacks. Oxygen use during air travel or at any time may help relieve a headache.
- Biofeedback programs may help reduce the pain. Discuss this with your caregiver.
- Keeping a dietary manual may be helpful. If you notice a connection between foods and your headaches, avoid them.

**SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:**

You have problems that may be related to the medications you are taking.

**SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:**

- An oral temperature above 102° F (38.9° C) develops, or as your caregiver suggests.
- You faint, or you develop weakness, numbness, or double vision.
- You cannot keep your balance, or have difficulty talking or walking.
- You develop neck pain or neck stiffness.
- You develop *nausea* (feeling sick to your stomach) or vomiting.
- You have any changes from your previous cluster headache, such as a severe headache which you have never experienced before.

**MAKE SURE YOU:**

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.