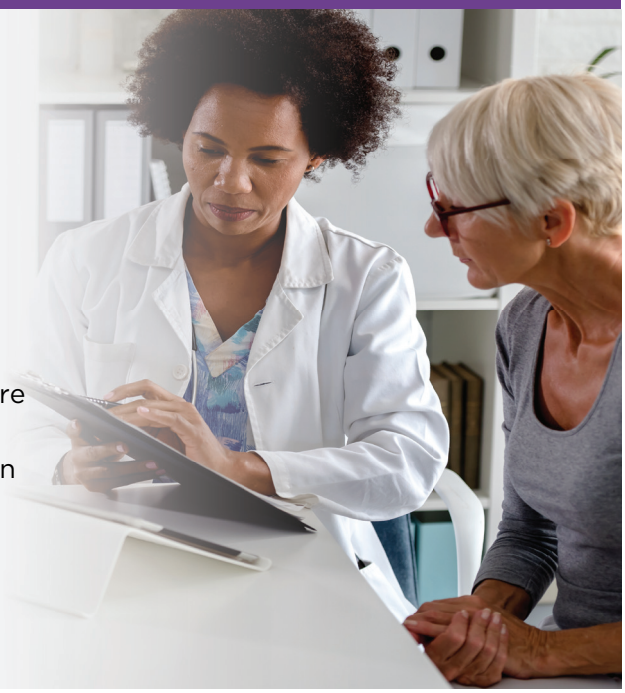
AMERICAN MIGRAINE FOUNDATION

FAQ: Understanding Acute Treatment for Migraine



Acute, or rescue, treatment for migraine can help relieve a migraine attack as it's happening.

When a migraine attack strikes, you want relief fast. That's where acute treatment comes into play. Acute medications are taken when you sense the first signs of a migraine attack or early on in an attack, and are designed to stop it before it gets worse.

We're answering some frequently asked questions to help you better understand this key part of a migraine treatment plan.

Do I need acute treatment?

Acute treatment is an important part of your overall treatment plan for migraine. It is important for people with frequent or infrequent attacks. It is important for mild or severe attacks. It is important even if you are on preventive treatment.

When do I take acute treatment?

Acute treatments work best when taken quickly. Depending on the medication, this may mean at the start of the headache or even before the headache develops, during what is referred to as the prodromal phase (this is different for different people, but can include symptoms such as irritability, fatigue and frequent yawning, frequent urination, and specific food cravings). Acute treatments should relieve symptoms quickly, without significant side effects. They may also increase the amount of time until the next migraine attack.

How do I decide which acute treatment is right for me?

A lot of acute treatments are in pill form, but some are available as orally disintegrating tablets, nasal sprays or subcutaneous injections. Intravenous medications are available for headaches that are refractory to at-home options, which must be given in an office or hospital setting.

The wide availability of different treatment options allows patients to work with their provider to find medications that work best for them. For example, someone who has an attack that is accompanied by severe nausea might benefit from an injectable or nasal spray, to avoid having to swallow a pill. Someone with a history of stomach ulcers should avoid taking NSAIDs such as ibuprofen and instead consider a migraine-specific option such as a triptan or gepant.

Medication options can be by prescription or over-the-counter. While over-the-counter (OTC) medications can be acquired without a prescription, it's important to be aware that they can cause side effects and medication overuse headache (MOH) if taken too often. Talking to your doctor is the best way to find an acute treatment that best suits your migraine treatment plan.

What types of acute medications are there?

The six main types of medications for the acute treatment of migraine are:

- Pain relievers like NSAIDs
- Ditans
- Triptans
- Anti-nausea medications
- CGRP antagonists (gepants)
- Dihydroergotamine (DHE)

Type of Treatment	Benefits	Drawbacks	Delivery Methods	OTC/ Prescription
Over the Counter Treatments (NSAIDs, acetaminophen and combination pills such as excedrin)	• Many are readily available as over-the-counter medication • Affordable • May be taken alone or with other treatments	• Patients who use these medications too frequently may develop medication overuse headache • Side-effects include upset stomach, heartburn, bruising • Patients with a history of ulcer disease, kidney disease and heart disease, high blood pressure need to take under a doctor's supervision • Not recommended in the early and late stages of pregnancy	• Oral • Nasal Spray • Injection	Some available OTC and by prescription
Triptans	• Readily available by prescription • Migraine specific • Available as pills, nasal sprays and injections, so talk to your doctor about which delivery method is best for you	• Side effects include fatigue, nausea, flushing and rarely throat or chest tightness • Patients with heart disease, high blood pressure or history of stroke should not take triptans • Specific triptans may be taken during pregnancy or while breastfeeding, but should always be discussed beforehand with your doctor • Patients who use too frequently may develop medication overuse headache	• Oral • Oral dissolving tablet • Nasal spray • Injection	Mostly by prescription
CGRP antagonists (gepants)	• Migraine specific • Likely no risk of medication overuse headache • Can sometimes also be useful for patients who do not respond to triptans or have side effects from triptans	• Side effects, if present, are generally mild and include nausea, sleepiness and dry mouth • Not recommended for pregnant or breastfeeding mothers	• Oral • Oral dissolving tablet • Nasal spray	Prescription only

Type of Treatment	Benefits	Drawbacks	Delivery Methods	OTC/ Prescription
Ditans	• Good for patients with a history of heart disease, stroke, or other medical conditions that increase their risk for heart attacks or stroke • Can sometimes be useful for patients who do not respond to triptans or have side effects from triptans	• Side effects include dizziness and sleepiness • No driving for eight hours after taking a dose • Not recommended for pregnant or breastfeeding mothers	• Oral	Prescription only
Anti-nausea medications	• Available as a prescription or over-the-counter • Help relieve nausea and vomiting as well as other symptoms of a migraine attack • Some help stop the migraine attack • Some available as a patch	• Often cause sleepiness as a side effect • Rare short-term and long-term side effects, which include muscle spasms or other abnormal movements	• Oral • Oral dissolving tablet • Injection • Suppository	Prescription and over-the-counter
Dihydroergotamine (DHE)	• Lower risk of medication overuse headache as compared to triptans • Lower rates of migraine recurrence within 24 hours as compared to triptans • Good for people who wake up with migraine, have menstrual migraine, allodynia or severe and/or prolonged migraine	• Not recommended during pregnancy • Not recommended for people with a history of heart disease, severe peripheral vascular disease or uncontrolled high blood pressure	• Nasal spray • Injection • Intravenous infusion	Prescription only
Muscle relaxers (tizanidine, methocarbamol, cyclobenzaprine)	• x	• x	• x	Prescription only

The mission of the American Migraine Foundation is to mobilize a community for patient support and advocacy, as well as drive and support impactful research that translates into advances for patients with migraine and other disabling diseases that cause severe head pain. Visit **americanmigrainefoundation.org** for more

American Migraine Foundation
One Rockefeller Plaza, 11th Floor
New York, NY 10020
P: +1 (929)-376-1333
E: info@americanmigrainefoundation.org