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## **Episodic and chronic migraine - treatment and risk factors - A literature review**

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**Abstract****Introduction and objective**

Migraine is a chronic paroxysmal neurological disease characterised by attacks of moderate to severe headache and accompanying symptoms such as hypersensitivity to light and sound and gastrointestinal disturbances such as nausea and vomiting, among others. In some people, an attack of pain is preceded by a migraine aura - visual disturbances, numbness, tingling and even muscle weakness. Treatment includes medications taken as a temporary measure (at the onset of an attack) and as a prophylactic measure. The aim of this study is to systematise information about chronic migraine and to raise awareness about this disease among health care workers and patients

**Brief description of the state of knowledge**

Migraine is a recurrent, usually unilateral, throbbing headache. A migraine usually lasts between 4 and 72 hours. It is characterised by varying degrees of severity and frequency of occurrence. The pain is exacerbated by emotion or physical exertion. There is photophobia,

hypersensitivity to sounds (phonophobia) and odours (osmophobia), and nausea and vomiting occur. Sometimes before a migraine episode occurs, a so-called aura - occurring in 10% of migraine cases may appear, in the form of paresthesias, visual field loss, appearance of gloom, paresis, aphasia. Chronic migraine is a headache that occurs for at least 15 days per month, at least 8 of which are days when the headache has the characteristics of migraine pain as described below or is relieved by prescription anti-migraine medication. There are many triggers for migraine, which include genetic, environmental and personal factors. Chronic migraine severely reduces the quality of life of affected patients; therefore it is important to raise awareness of currently available methods for its diagnosis and treatment

### **Summary**

Early recognition and treatment of migraine improves the quality of life of patients therefore any action to increase public knowledge and awareness on the disease is important.

### **Keywords**

Migraine, migraine risk factors, migraine treatment, chronic migraine, migraine pharmacotherapy

### **Introduction and description of current knowledge**

Migraine is by far the most frequent neurological problem in primary care. Migraine is ranked second among causes of disability worldwide and first among young women, as reported in the latest Global Burden Disease survey. Migraine is a highly prevalent disorder, as it affects 18% of women and 6% of men, while chronic migraine affects 2% of the global population and is extremely burdening for patients and their families. [1] Chronic migraine is described by frequent headache attacks with at least 15 headache days per month. Patients with chronic migraine usually have a history of episodic migraine and their headache intensity tends to increase over time.[2]

Migraine is occasionally mistaken for other types of headaches, such as tension headache. Migraine patients may not receive a correct diagnosis and appropriate treatment.[3] As there are currently no dedicated diagnostic tests or biomarkers available, the diagnosis of most primary headache disorders is still exclusively based on clinical assessment, which complicates the diagnosis process. [4] The clinical symptoms of migraine in childhood differs

from those in adulthood. Childhood migraine is marked by shorter attacks and less often one-sided pain. Accompanying manifestations include mild light intolerance and rarely noise intolerance for example, while emesis and craniofacial autonomic features are significantly more frequent in comparison to the adult patients. [5] Most patients have a family history of migraine. [6]

### **The genesis of migraine headache**

The theories describing the probable pathomechanism of migraine headache include the following: the vascular theory, the neuronal theory, the inflammation of the neural tissue, biochemical theory, central sensitisation theory and genetic origin. The vascular theory assumes that migraine symptoms are caused by vasoconstriction (vasoconstriction of the occipital region during the visual aura) and then their relaxation/dilatation which is accompanied by hyperperfusion and perivascular oedema to be the cause of severe pain. The neural theory identifies the source of migraine headaches as a disturbance in the bioelectrical activity of the brain. A different hypothesis is that sterile inflammation of the nerve tissue (neuroinflammation) is the reason for migraine. An increase in the release of inflammatory factors by the meningeal vessels stimulates the sensory nerves, especially the trigeminal nerve, which may be the origin of the migraine.[7] It remains a challenge to understand the mechanisms of migraine because migraine is not a static disorder, and even in its episodic form migraine continues to be an ‘evolving’ chronic condition. [5] The biochemical theory is mainly founded on disorders of serotonergic transmission. There is also a hypothesis of autonomic system disturbances (sympathetic insufficiency) in migraine patients. It would explain the symptoms occurring in patients with migraine (vasomotor and heart rhythm disturbances, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea).[7] Genetic factors may determinate vulnerability to migraine, while various environmental factors may play a role in the progression of a migraine attack. [5]

### **Migraine risk factors**

A number of factors are involved in the progression of migraine. The power of the proof is higher for some of the factors than for others, though this may reflect the strength of the methodologies, study design and sampling size of the studies undertaken, and not necessary the strength of the correlation. The factors are mainly divided in groups such as suboptimal treatment, comorbidities, lifestyle and external factors and demographic factors.

Non-optimal treatment of episodic migraine in the acute phase is related to an increased risk of progression to chronic migraine. Continuing suboptimal acute therapy may lead to a

change in dosage or the use of another acute drug, possibly resulting in increased drug misuse and risk of subsequent progression of the disease. [8] It should also be noted that the patients who did not think they could control their headache or thought their headache was due to chance or fate were more likely to inadequately manage their headache, resulting in worse overall disability. These factors emphasise the necessity of being educated on how best to effectively manage and cope with migraine. There is a high need for healthcare professionals to educate patients in that matter of migraine headache.[9]

A number of common neurological and psychiatric disorders show co-existence with migraine. Depression and anxiety are both associated with an elevated migraine risk, which is even greater when both disorders co-occur in a patient. About 45-65% of patients with depressive disorders fulfil the criteria for anxiety disorders and inversely, 30-65% of patients with anxiety disorders also have depression. Migraine doubles the risks of ischaemic stroke, which is most evident in migraine with aura. Migraine may enhance individual vulnerability to ischaemic stroke in acute cerebral ischaemia. Migraine may be a stroke risk factor or may be an symptom of underlying structural anomalies. Lifetime frequency of migraine is elevated in patients with epilepsy. Co-occurrence is especially common in haemiplegic migraine, with epilepsy present in ~40% of patients with haemiplegic migraine. Migraine aura-triggered attacks may also develop during or directly after an attack of migraine with aura, which has not been reported for migraine without aura [10].

Metabolic associated comorbidities are highly common in the advanced disease states, including obesity and metabolic syndrome. Studies showed an elevated risk of metabolic syndrome in overweight individuals (body mass index [BMI] 25 to < 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) and an even greater risk of metabolic syndrome in obese individuals (BMI ≥ 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) in comparison to normal weight individuals. [8]

Scientists have been trying to design lifestyle modification strategies for the prevention and treatment of headaches. The roles of dietary factors have been recognized, which has resulted in the formulation of diet therapy strategies for headaches, including migraine. The involvement of dietary associations in the pathogenesis of headache has been acknowledged and, on this basis, an eradication diet strategy has been implemented in this area. It is widely assumed that migraines are diet-sensitive and that some dietary ingredients trigger migraine attacks. There are long listings of possible dietary triggers, but there is still controversy in this area. Chocolate, citrus fruits, nuts, ice cream, tomatoes, onions, dairy products, alcoholic beverages, coffee, caffeine, monosodium glutamate (MSG), histamine, tyramine,

phenylethylamine, nitrites, aspartame, sucralose and gluten have been noted in the literature. [11]

One of the contributing factors to migraine conversion is sleep disorders, which can function as a trigger and/or consolidating factor in these migraine patients.[12] These disturbances often coexist, which has resulted in the hypothesis of an associated not just coincidental occurrence. More recent biochemical and functional imaging research has now identified central nervous system structures and neurotransmitters that are involved in the migraine pathophysiology and also relevant to the control of normal sleep architecture, implying a possible causative role, in the pathogenesis of both disorders, of the dysregulation in these common nervous system tracts. [13] The hypothalamus is a key controller of homeostatic mechanisms, to include sleep and wakefulness cycles, which are regulated diurnally. Considering circadian character of several forms of attacks, the clinical association with sleep disorders and the neuroimaging data confirming abnormal hypothalamic activation in several primary headache disorders may be an answer in clinical diagnosis. [14] Some research confirms the evidence that migraine patients have worse sleep quality than non-migraine patients, that self-reported bad sleep quality is related to an increased rate of attacks or migraine chronicity and that preventative migraine therapy can increase sleep quality. [13]

Gut dysbiosis appears to play a key role among the factors linked to migraine occurrence. In fact, it has been proven that the gut is able to modify central nervous system activity through the gut-brain axis. The microbiological components and their inheritance in genetics are impacted by the lifestyle, eating patterns and other factors external to the body, such as the surroundings. [15] Accordingly, the gut can be seen as some kind of brain, as it is producing a variety of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and histamine. [16] A number of studies have found that low brain serotonin is strongly related to migraine. In detail, migraineurs have greater levels of brain serotonin levels throughout an acute pain attack in comparison to periods in-between attacks. [17] Furthermore, it was revealed that patients with chronic migraine showed elevated histamine levels than healthy individuals, both during and between migraine attacks. [18] In fact, numerous studies in both animal models and clinical trials have shown changes in the gut microbiota of migraine patients compared to healthy individuals. Thus, it is essential to understanding whether particular nutritional strategies or lifestyle modifications can be a relevant and an innovative complementary therapy in the treatment of migraine. [15]

## **Pharmacological treatment of acute migraine**

When treating migraine, the most important principle is that treatment should be initiated at an early stage and, if treatment fails, patients should be presented with a further alternative within a very short period of time.[19] One of the possibilities is the preventive therapy. Adequate oral medication is beneficial in the preventive therapy of episodic migraine. The different classes of drugs that have been shown to be helpful in the oral preventive treatment of migraine are mainly, but not only, antihypertensive drugs, antidepressants and antiepileptics.[20] A reduction in headache frequencies of more than 50 percent with the antihypertensive and antidepressant drugs was recorded in about half to two-thirds of people when they were taking as part of initial preventive therapy. [21]

When dealing with an acute migraine attack, patients get to choose from various therapeutical options too.

Sumatriptan was authorised in 1992 by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Since then, triptans have been the prominent choice for the treatment of acute migraines. The effectiveness of triptans in the treatment of migraine has been validated, as, however, how migraine arises has not been fully clarified, nor has the exact mode of action been explained. It is presumed that the following mechanisms may play an important role: the constriction of pathologically dilated intracranial blood vessels by triptans and the restoration of normal blood flow, and the blocking of the release of pro-inflammatory neurotransmitters at the level of the nerve endings in the perivascular space. Currently, there is a modern generation of triptans group, which include drugs such as rizatriptan, zolmitriptan, naratriptan or eletriptan. [22]

Ergot alkaloids, like ergotamine (approved in 1976), have been in use since the 1970s for the symptoms treatment of acute migraine. Dihydroergotamine (DHE) is recommended for the acute treatment of migraine headaches with or without aura and for the acute treatment of cluster headache episodes. DHE is associated with a high binding affinity to the 5-HT<sub>1D</sub> $\alpha$  and 5-HT<sub>1D</sub> $\beta$  receptors. It has been proposed that two theories explain the effectiveness of 5-HT<sub>1D</sub> receptor agonists in migraine: (i) activation of 5-HT<sub>1D</sub> receptors localised on intracranial blood vessels and consequent vasoconstriction of blood vessels, although this has little significance for therapeutic effect, and (ii) activation of 5-HT<sub>1D</sub> receptors on trigeminal sensory nerve endings, which results in the inhibition of the production of proinflammatory neuropeptides.[23]



Ditans are part of a new class of drugs which target the 5-HT<sub>1F</sub> receptor for the therapy of acute migraine. One of this class, lasmiditan, a high selective 5-HT<sub>1F</sub> agonist, was authorised in 2019. Ditans are structurally different from triptans in that triptans have an indole group structure that highly resembles the 5-HT receptor, whereas ditans substitute this indole group with a pyridine-piperidine scaffold. Triptans bond non-selectively to 5-HT<sub>1B</sub> and 5-HT<sub>1D</sub> receptors and with variable binding affinity to 5-HT<sub>1F</sub> receptors, resulting in direct vasoconstriction.[24]

From the late 1980s, research has revealed that CGRP is considerably implicated in the pathophysiology of migraine. [22] CGRP can cause migraine in patients, and inhibition of the canonical CGRP receptor is successful in the treatment of acute migraine. [25] Two gepants, ubrogepant and rimegepant, have been FDA endorsed for acute migraine treatment. As gepants do not vasoconstrict the cranial arteries, they can be used as first-line therapy for migraine in patients at higher risk of cardiovascular incidents or in those with proven cardiovascular disease. [22]

Migraine is characterised by inflammation as well. Thus, the use of anti-inflammatory drugs to suppress the inflammatory cascade can help to relieve migraine headaches and to prevent their reoccurrence, and anti-inflammatory drugs may also provide advantages by easing inflammation [26]

### **Pharmacological treatment of chronic migraine**

Botulinum toxin is a compound protein that is produced by a Gram-positive and anaerobic bacterium known as *Clostridium botulinum*. It was originally proposed as a hypothesis that the pain-relieving mechanism of this toxin is due to muscle relaxation with subsequent hypotension. A number of mechanisms have been suggested for the function of BoNT-A, including the inhibition of exocytosis of neurochemicals and proteins of the motor and sensorimotor systems, the reduction of proinflammatory cell exocytosis, neurotransmitters and nervous system excitatory neuropeptides such as substance P, CGRP and glutamate. [27] It has now become a first-choice therapy for many disorders, this includes dystonia, spasticity, hyperhidrosis and some types of bladder disorders. In the therapy of migraine, botulinum toxin is injected intramuscularly into numerous areas of the head and back of the neck, with repeated administration on a regular basis. It is believed that botulinum toxin has the potential to prevent migraine by disrupting SNAP-25, one of the proteins of the SNARE complex, by impairing

synaptic vesicle assembly and the releasing of neurotransmitters related to pain susceptibility. [22]

Another group of drugs used in therapy of chronic migraine are antagonists of  $\beta$ -adrenoceptors. Propranolol is one of the most frequently used drugs for migraine prevention, and numerous clinical studies have been consistently proving its efficiency in decreasing the frequency of migraine attacks since the 1970s [22]

It has been suggested that propranolol decreases central hyperexcitability by suppressing  $\beta_1$ -adrenoreceptor-mediated norepinephrine releasing, hence decreasing central catecholaminergic hyperexcitability. In a further addition, propranolol suppresses NO generation by blocking inducible NOS, as well to inhibit kainate-induced afferents and act in synergy with NMDA blockers to diminish neuronal activity and have membrane stabilising qualities. One latest study demonstrated a considerable decline in the frequency, intensity and length of migraine headaches. [28]

### **Non-pharmacological treatment of migraine**

The currently existing oral pharmacological treatments for migraine may be badly tolerated by certain patients. Uncomfortable side-effects and less-than-expected efficiency can lead to low compliance with treatment and other complaints such as headache chronicity and medication misuse. However, a variety of new therapeutic approaches for the treatment of migraine have become available in recent years, as well as new technical approaches that hold great promise as areas for development. [29]

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a therapeutic treatment that uses cognitive modifiers to help manage mental disorders and psychological distress. The latest practice guidelines emphasise CBT as a selective psychotherapy for issues that range from depression, anxiety and personality disorders to chronic pain, addiction and relationship pain. Migraine sufferers are turning increasingly to supplementary and integrative health approaches [30] As patients tend to prefer CBT treatment for different reasons, a number of behavioural methods of migraine reduction have been used, particularly during pregnancy or when the choice of pharmacotherapy for patients is restricted, for instance because of low efficacy or lack of persistence of pharmacotherapy, or in association with pharmacological treatment. [31] CBT addresses the cognitive mechanisms involved in the development and retention of psychopathology, especially of emotional pain and dysphoria, which are primarily conducted

during sessions, which requires therapists to co-ordinate their interventions to most effectively help patients. [32] CBT therapy allows patients to elaborate prevention and self-care strategies, such as identifying their triggers, modification of maladaptive, related thoughts, feelings and behaviours related to the headache, and the physiological autoregulation strategies. The behavioural therapies for migraine headaches, which include behavioural cognitive therapy, stress relaxation and biofeedback, have shown effectiveness in decreasing the incidence of migraine attacks and migraine-associated disorders. [30]

### **A surgical therapy of chronic migraine headaches**

According to the inflammation theory of migraine origin, chronic inflammation of some cranial nerves leads to a string of inflammation that causes migraines of the type without aura. For attacks located anteriorly, two nerves would be engaged (on each side): the supraorbital and suprascapular nerves. The neurolysis of these nerves would allow to obtain successful outcomes in a high percentage of cases. These nerves are typically irritated mechanically by the spasm of the adjacent facial muscles: the supraspinatus tiltator muscle and the supraspinatus depressor muscle. The operative approach is based therefore on neurolysis of the two nerves with concurrent sectioning of these muscles. The operation is carried out using regional anaesthesia with sedation. According to this paper, a decrease of monthly migraine attacks has been observed among the patients who have undergone the surgery. [33]

### **Summary**

Early recognition and treatment of migraine attacks allows the right therapy to be chosen for the patient. Despite the unclear origin of this disease, we now have, as a health service, a multitude of therapeutic options available to patients. This is why it is so important to identify the symptoms, manage the patient appropriately and treat the disease with the means at our disposal. It is important for health care professionals to promote the current state of knowledge about migraine and its treatments. This will significantly improve the quality of life for many sick patients.

### **Disclosure**

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