

It's not just in your head

When migraine hits hard

Manila Bulletin · 2 Apr 2019 · C1

It's something you can't control. It's a pain you have never experienced before. It's torture. It's not easy to live with. In fact, migraines are more than just pain. It affects not just the head, but also the whole body and, sometimes, even the quality of life.

Migraine is more than just a headache. In fact, the World Health Organization states that migraine is one of the 10 most disabling diseases. What causes a migraine?

Can it be cured? More important, is it really beyond control?

Acting out? All in your head? Far from it. According to the American Migraine Foundation, this condition affects as many as 144 million people world wide. What makes a migraine different from other types of headache is its intensity, duration, and effect. A migraine is a throbbing headache, usually worse on one side, that is moderate or severely painful. Migraines usually last from hours to days if left untreated, making one miss school, work, or other daily activities. It differs from other headaches as migraine may also cause sensitivity to light, smell, or sound. It may make one feel sick or vomit, and it may worsen if physical activity is involved. Moreover, migraines are triggered by various factors such as food, hormonal changes, certain smells, sleep deprivation, or weather changes.

Migraines may partly be genetic, but there are a lot of other factors at play that may also contribute to the condition. Migraine may begin at childhood. It is usually preceded by symptoms before the actual headache. Symptoms include irritability, fatigue, or food cravings. It may or may not be followed by neurological symptoms (temporary sensory changes), also called an aura.

According to The Migraine Trust, an English charity dedicated to research on its causes and treatments, migraine in itself is categorized into two types: Migraine without aura is the most common type, experienced by most of migraine patients. Symptoms are described as the typical migraine that may occur once a year to as often as every several weeks. Migraine with aura is also common. It includes most or all of the symptoms as migraine without aura but with additional neurological symptoms that develop within minutes but usually subside in less than an hour. These include visual changes such as blind or colored spots, seeing stars, flashing lights, or temporary blindness. Other physical changes that may be experienced include numbness or tingling, pins and needles, weakness on one side of the body, or a feeling of spinning. Frequency of attack varies from patient to patient, from once a year to as often as every several weeks.

Fewer migraine patients experience migraine with aura, and there are also subtypes that are much rarer.

Not all migraine patients experience an aura, and not all those who experience an aura may also feel the headache. If the headache is experienced, the postdrome or recovery stage may leave the patient feeling hung over or tired.

Migraine, at its worst, can disrupt the patient's daily activities. If left untreated, it may affect one's quality of life for the rest of one's life. This is why awareness and proper diagnosis by a physician is important, especially in the Philippines, where headache disorders are the second most disabling health problem in 2017, according to a Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study.

If diagnosed, there are several treatment options for every type of migraine that is specific to the individual and how he or she experiences it. There are those that prevent an attack or those that you take at its onset.

Headaches, whether mild, moderate, or severe, even if it happens just once or recurs, is reason enough to take a trip to the doctor. Migraines, as with other conditions, must be diagnosed properly so that proper care, prevention, and treatment may be administered. Just because it is manageable does not mean it is okay not to get checked. Always be on the safe side when it comes to your health. Do not treat a headache or migraine as if it is "all in your head."