

## Migraine is three times more common in women

When it comes to treating migraines, timing is everything,

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AMIGRAINE is not just a bad headache. It commonly manifests as a throbbing pain — usually on one side of the head or sometimes both — and can have far-reaching consequences in all areas of the person's life. Sunway Medical Centre consultant neurologist, Dr Raymond Tan, says it is an incapacitating neurological disorder

that may come with a wide range of symptoms, including blurred vision, nausea and vomiting.

Some patients may become sensitive to light, noise and scents, besides experiencing focal neurological symptoms. Episodes can last between four and 72 hours. Migraine can afflict men, women and children, but the vast majority who suffer chronic crippling attacks are women.

Migraine is three times more common in women than men, and it is their fourth leading cause of disability.

Sunway Medical Centre consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist, Dr Sharmina Kamal, says women are more affected because of hormonal changes. Oestrogen helps regulate the female reproductive system and controls chemicals in the brain that impact the sensation of pain.

Therefore, a drop in oestrogen levels can contribute to the development of chronic headaches or migraines.

In childhood, migraine is more prevalent in males. However, once the influence of oestrogen begins, the prevalence starts to rise in females, contributing to frequent, longerlasting headaches in women between the ages of 20 and 45.

Along with hormonal changes, Dr Sharmina says there are other factors and events that may trigger a migraine, which include lack of sleep or too much sleep, skipping meals, weather changes, and alcohol and caffeine consumption.

These, coupled with stress, have made migraines part and parcel of many women's day-to-day lives.

### DEALING WITH MIGRAINES

The good news is that migraine is a modifiable disorder and there is hope of relief by taking simple measures.

Dr Tan says the best thing to do at the start of a migraine is to stop your activity and get some rest, preferably in a quiet and dimly lit room or area. Taking a simple analgesic like paracetamol at the start also often helps to limit the severity.

Application of topical menthol may lessen the intensity of acute migraines, although this is best avoided in women who are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Medication is a proven way to treat and prevent migraines. However, medication is only part of the story. Combining therapy or medication with behavioural measures and lifestyle changes that promote overall good health can often be the most effective way to handle migraine attacks.

For example, maintaining a healthy lifestyle which includes eating nutritious food, adequate hydration, frequent exercise, and proper sleep. You can also speak to your physician about taking daily vitamins or supplements, such as vitamin B or magnesium.

Migraines are a real source of pain, but most of the time, they are not signs that one has a serious medical problem. However, it is worth speaking to a doctor when you have new symptoms that are more severe than normal.

Although migraine attacks are not a threat to life and limb, complications can occur.

“Occasionally, a migraine persists for more than

72 hours and becomes debilitating and resistant to conventional treatment. And in cases associated with persistent vomiting, this could lead to dehydration and its associated problems, which require hospitalisation with intravenous fluids and medication,” says Dr Tan.

He adds that young women who suffer migraines with aura, especially those who smoke or use oral contraceptives, have an increased risk of stroke and, in some cases, may experience seizures.

Migraines with aura are recurring headaches that strike after or at the same time with sensory disturbances, which include flashes of light, blind spots and other vision changes, or a tingling sensation in the hands or face.

With that, it is advisable for women at risk to avoid smoking and choose other forms of contraception, if possible.

If you need care, don’t delay. When it comes to treating migraines, timing is everything. Waiting too long to address

symptoms or take preventive steps can increase how often and severe it strikes.

Know and avoid your triggers, treat symptoms early and find medications or therapies that work best to relieve the pain.