

Define & End Cluster Headaches

What is a cluster headache?

This is another type of headache. Typically these headaches “cluster”, they occur often daily at about the same time each day for a period of time. The pain is described as being like a spear poking through the eye, the nose runs and eye waters on the side of the pain, it’s abrupt sudden onset and end are classic diagnostic hallmarks.

A cluster headache is a rare type of headache that is more common in men. Cluster headaches start suddenly. The pain is usually behind or around one eye and is very severe. The eye and nose on the same side as the pain may become red, swollen and runny. Cluster headaches also cause restlessness. These headaches can be frightening to the sufferer and his or her family.

A cluster headache can last a few minutes or several hours, but it usually lasts for 30 to 45 minutes. Cluster headaches typically occur at the same time each day for several weeks, until the "cluster period" is over. Cluster periods usually last 4 to 8 weeks and may occur every few months. At other times, no cluster headaches will occur.

What causes cluster headaches?

The cause of cluster headaches is not known. Cluster headaches do not appear to be related to other illnesses or to diseases of the brain. They do not seem to run in families.

How do I know if I have cluster headaches?

Your description of your headaches will help your doctor make the diagnosis. The time and pattern of attacks are very important, so keep a diary of your pain. Family members or others who see you during a headache can also help by telling the doctor how you look and act. Don't be embarrassed to tell your doctor about your attempts to relieve the pain (such as banging your head against furniture). These attempts are common, and talking about them will help your doctor judge how severe the headaches are.

Your doctor will also give you a physical exam. Tests will probably not be needed to diagnose cluster headaches, but your doctor may order tests to rule out other illnesses.

Can I do anything to prevent headaches once a cluster period has started?

During a cluster period, it is important to keep to your usual routine, remain calm and avoid changing your sleep pattern. Once a cluster period has started, a change in sleep pattern, particularly taking an afternoon nap, seems to bring on the headaches.

Drinking alcohol will also bring on headaches during cluster periods. This happens very quickly -- before you finish the first drink. Alcohol should be completely avoided until the cluster period is over. Stress may bring on attacks, and the headaches may start when you are relaxing after a stressful time.

What treatments are available?

Several treatments are available for cluster headaches. It is important to work with your doctor to talk about side effects of different medicines, pick the right treatment for you and set up a schedule for taking the medicines your doctor prescribes.

Breathing pure oxygen typically will rapidly resolve these headaches

Your doctor will probably prescribe 2 medicines. One medicine is taken regularly during a cluster period to reduce the number of headaches. In order for the medicine to work, the level of the drug in your blood must be high at the time your attacks usually start.

Tripitans are one class of drug that help stop the headache once it's begun. They're expensive but usually work better than opiates for pain control which take longer to work; these headaches can be quite short-lived with their sudden onset. Ideally, they should be prevented. This is best done with antidepressants such as Amitriptyline, Beta blockers such as Propranolol and calcium channel blockers such as Verapamil. Some of the anti-epilepsy medicines such as Carbamazepine and Valproic acid can also help prevent them but the latter two cause some sedation, fatigue, clumsiness and slow thinking with memory problems at times and the blood levels may need to be monitored. For more information, check out the links section @ www.tequestafamilypractice.com

To Your Health!

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