

# Pacific Rim Headache Center

## Patient Information Sheet 7

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### Status Migraine

The word “status” comes from the Latin word, which means “unchanging.” This is a very distressing headache syndrome defined as a migraine headache, often severe, that comes on and continues for more than three days. Sometimes this migraine can go on unchanged for weeks or rarely even months. More typically, the headache is self-limiting and will usually resolve within a week.

A status migraine is usually experienced by someone who frequently suffers from severe migraines. For them it is simply a migraine that “got away.” Sometimes, however, it is experienced by someone who rarely, or has never experienced a migraine before. In that case, it can be frightening for the sufferer. They can easily, but wrongly, conclude that something is seriously wrong with them. Fortunately that is rarely true.

Status migraine is often provoked by a strong trigger. The most common trigger for status migraine is a woman who experiences some type of change in their estrogen levels. For example, this can happen when a young girl first starts menstruating, when a woman goes on or off a birth control pill or other forms of estrogen. Additional examples of this change in hormones provoking a status migraine are at the beginning of pregnancy, within weeks of having a baby or sometime during menopause.

Other strong triggers that can provoke a status migraine in men or women include extreme change in sleep (staying up for two days), infections such as any viral syndrome including the flu. Sometimes more severe infections such as meningitis or encephalitis can start a severe migraine that continues on for weeks or months after the infection has resolved. Head and neck injuries can also act as a trigger for this type of migraine and sometimes a status migraine will start for no clear reason or trigger.

During the course of a status migraine the sufferer can become very distressed or “worn out” from the pain. If they are experiencing a lot of nausea and vomiting, they can become dehydrated and very rarely will have to be hospitalized.

#### What Causes Migraine?

We now know that the cause of all types of migraine is the release of chemicals from nerves endings along the lining of the brain (called the Dura Mater) which causes an inflammation. Inflammation is the body’s way of fighting infection and trauma. The brain should release the chemicals only when there is an infection or trauma to the brain or head. In those situations, the inflammation helps the brain to fight infection and to recover from trauma. Pain in that instance pain is a good thing because it acts like a warning, telling the sufferer that something is wrong, and it also causes the sufferer to rest and be quiet while the brain.

In migraine of all types, there is no infection or trauma so the inflammation has no good purpose. With migraine, the alarm system is activated by innocent triggers like the natural change of estrogen or disruptions in sleep (to name only two of many triggers). People who get migraines frequently have an alarm system that has been genetically set too sensitive due to no fault of their own.

In status migraine, this inflammation is usually very persistent and entrenched. Sometimes simple treatments will clear up this inflammation and make the migraine go away. Sometimes the treatments have to be more aggressive and longer to work.

## Treatment of Status Migraine

There are several steps that can be taken to stop a status migraine. If the sufferer isn't too distressed or the headache has not gone on for more than a week, simple steps may work. If the sufferer is at their wits end, then more aggressive steps may need to be taken. I will list the steps that are usually taken starting with the most simple.

**Step 1:** A triptan drug can be given twice a day for about three to five days. Triptans are a class of drugs that reverse migraine. The way they work is by turning off the nerves that are releasing the chemicals which are causing the inflammation on the Dura Mater.

When a migraine naturally goes away, the brain turns off these nerves by releasing two (or more) sub-types of a chemical called serotonin. This serotonin plugs into the switches (called receptors) on the nerves which and turns them off. There is no way to artificially put these natural serotonins into the brain. The triptan drugs look just like these serotonins and can be taken by mouth or other means and do get to the brain.

Normally it only takes one or two doses of these drugs to shut down a typical migraine. A status migraine though, is so entrenched that the triptans have to be used for several days to work. The names of these drugs are Imitrex, Zomig, Maxalt, Amerge, Frova, Relpax and Axert.

### Step 2

If the first step is not successful then an alternative is to use a medication called dihydroergotamine, also known as DHE-45®. This substance is a natural occurring chemical found in a particular fungus. It has been known for hundreds of years to be effective in shutting down migraine, even status migraine. It works the same way as the triptan drugs, by mimicking natural serotonins. DHE-45 works best if given by injection. It can also be given intravenously. Sometimes one dose does it but more often, especially if the migraine has gone on for days, it will take a series of dose, twice a day for 3 - 5 days.

### Step 3

When a status migraine is really entrenched, sometimes steroids are effective in getting rid of the inflammation and shutting down the headache. Steroids can be given intravenously but it is easier to take than as pills for about 5-10 days. There are other IV medications that can help shut down a status migraine including valproate (Depacon®).

### Step 4

If the above approaches do not work, or the headache has gone on for more than two weeks, then it becomes reasonable to start a longer-term preventative. These medications help prevent migraines from starting. They are slower to work but will help keep the migraine from re-starting if it ever goes away. Sometimes the treatments mentioned above do work but then the headache comes right back. These preventative medications help to break that cycle.