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# Migraine and aura

One in five people experience migraine with aura, although they may not always have aura symptoms prior to every headache attack. Visual aura is the most common type of aura.

## What is aura?

Aura is a brain phenomenon in its own right and it can occur on its own in addition to developing as part of migraine or other headache disorder symptoms. Migraine aura is the collective name that's given to the many types of neurological symptoms that can occur just before or during an attack. Although migraine aura is relatively common affecting one in five people, migraine without aura is the most common type of migraine.

“Aura itself used to be thought to be due to blood vessels constricting and dilating, however, that theory has now gone,” says Dr Nick Silver, consultant neurologist at The Walton Centre NHS Foundation Trust. “Aura is now thought to be a neurological problem that is related to abnormal nerve function in the brain. This leads to spreading waves of temporary inactivity in certain areas of the brain. It also describes the clinical phenomena of how aura often starts small and progresses as symptoms begin to spread across the body. Depending on which part of the brain is affected, symptoms can develop in the corresponding part of the body. For example, if the spreading wave of inactivity crosses over the part of the brain that is responsible for vision – the occipital cortex (located at the back of the head) - then people would typically experience visual aura symptoms, including noticing a part of their vision is missing or seeing scintillations (a flash or sparkle of light). If the spreading pattern occurs over the area that controls speech, you may experience speech and language problems as the symptoms of an aura.”

## Common traits

Aura typically lasts for around 15-20 minutes, although it can differ between individuals and even attacks and be shorter or longer. Aura occurs as part of a four-stage process during a migrainous episode. It begins with the premonitory or prodromal phase, where early warning signs commence. This stage is present in

40-50% of people affected by migraine aura. Symptoms include fatigue, yawning, craving sweet foods, irritability, feeling spaced out or detached and being more sensitive to noise or light. The aura phase is when strange feelings start and this is present in 20% of people, although aura symptoms may not develop in every migrainous attack. Types of aura include visual aura with symptoms such as temporary loss of vision and flashes of light. Numbness and pins and needles are the second most common type of aura. Numbness usually starts in the hand, travels up the arm and then involves the face, lips and tongue – sometimes the legs may also be involved. The third most common type of aura involves problems with speech. Other types of aura may also occur including experiencing an odd smell, food cravings or other odd sensations. The premonitory and aura phases are then often followed by the headache and recovery phases (though not always).

“A lot of people think their migraine starts when they get an aura,” says Dr Silver. “Yet, for up to 40-50% of patients will have symptoms leading up to the migraine that are part of the actual attack. This will have started hours or sometimes even days before without them being aware of that.”

Another common mistake we make is to take medication when the aura starts: “this is not advised as triptans are contraindicated during the aura,” warns Dr Silver. He advises that medication should be taken once the aura has finished, at the beginning of the headache phase.

## Managing migraine aura

In the majority of people, migraine aura is treated as part of the management of the underlying headache condition, says Dr Silver. He recommends cutting down on painkiller use as a primary treatment to prevent attacks. "Better still, stop taking painkillers if you can to reduce your migraine risk."

Lifestyle changes can also work as an effective preventative. Dr Silver advises eliminating caffeine from your diet, drinking plenty of fluids, eating regularly and developing a good sleep routine by waking and retiring to bed at the same time each day. "These actions will take you away from your triggering threshold so it will take a lot more impetus to provoke a migraine and potential aura symptoms," says Dr Silver.

In terms of supplement support, magnesium and riboflavin (vitamin B2) are both readily available over the counter. Magnesium is an essential mineral that can be deficient in people affected by migraine. It's thought that levels of magnesium can be low during attacks. Some people have found taking a daily magnesium supplement is beneficial to prevent migraine aura, however, that may not be the case for everyone. "Magnesium is generally thought to be safe but whether it is effective or not, we don't currently know," says Dr Silver. He advises starting with 500mg per day and taking magnesium for three to four months to assess whether it will be effective for you. Dr Silver is also not convinced on the effectiveness of riboflavin (vitamin B2), however, it may provide a useful effect for some people. "There is a small amount of

evidence that suggests magnesium and vitamin B2 may be helpful but not enough to say for definite," adds Dr Silver.

## Addressing migraine aura concerns

During a migraine aura attack, people can become very concerned that they are actually experiencing stroke symptoms. Dr Silver advises that there is an important differential between the two that can help to allay any fears. "What differentiates migraine aura from stroke is that migraine aura is a gradual onset problem. In the case of stroke, all the problems start very quickly," explains Dr Silver. "For people affected by migraine aura, they will have experienced the premonitory phase and those early warning signs for many hours, even a day or so, before the attack starts – we do not see that in stroke. Additionally, in stroke we usually see loss of function - whereas with aura, we will often see positive phenomena such as flashes or zig zags in our vision," says Dr Silver.

During the migraine aura phase, there isn't much that people around you can do to help. However, Dr Silver suggests providing reassurance can be very beneficial for people affected by migraine aura.



If you would like to discuss  
your migraine aura  
symptoms call us weekdays  
10am to 4pm on  
**08456 011 033**