Migraine Trigger Guide:

Vision

Explanation

Vision can trigger migraine attacks when a person experiences sensitivity to any form of light or visual stress in between attacks.

Trigger causes

Visual migraine triggers can include:

- Bright sunlight
- Glare
- Car headlights or other bright lights at night
- Flickering sunlight through trees and other obstructions, which create a strobe-like effect.
- Bold patterns which strain the eye
- Fluorescent lights
- TV screens (particularly in a dark room)
- Computer screen
- Phone screen
- Camera flash
- Irlen syndrome
  - A perceptual processing disorder. Often confused for an optical problem (requiring prescription glasses). It relates to the brain's ability to process visual information (often treated with tinted lenses).
  - This problem tends to run in families and is not currently identified by standardized educational or medical tests.

How do you know if this is an issue?

Visual triggers can be difficult to uncover. Many suffer light sensitivity for years without realizing its contribution to their migraine condition.

Others have become more sensitive to visual triggers over time.

Some only experience sensitivity during the time of a migraine attack.
Options to try

In past studies, patients wearing precision-tinted lenses have been shown to experience a reduction in migraine attacks.\(^1\)

It is reasonable to conclude that the trigger threshold for those with migraine could be lowered by providing precision-tinted lenses if their attacks are triggered by visual stressors.

Tips to manage light sensitivity:

- Ensure you wear polarized sunglasses when outside or driving.
- A hat or cap is also helpful to reduce glare.
- Be mindful of looking too long at bright screens, including TV screens in dark rooms.
- Avoid reading an iPad or phone screen for too long, at night or around bedtime. The bright lights from these screens can be triggers.
- Adjust the brightness settings on your computer screens and other devices.
- Wear colored lenses (a.k.a. precision-tinted lenses) indoors to help protect from fluorescent lights and screens.
- When working with email, PowerPoint, Word, Excel or similar programs, often changing the default background color can make a surprising difference. Changing the background to one which reduces glare such as violet, pale green, blue or light brown (try a bunch and see which feels most comfortable) can make a difference, especially if you spend a lot of time using these applications. The same also applies for your home computer screen & program(s).

Watch-outs

If you have regular headaches that you think may be linked to your vision, especially if you already use prescription glasses, then light sensitivity may be an issue. Precision-tinted lenses may be an appropriate option to consider.

In a 2008 study published in the journal *Headache*, 26 percent of patients answered “no” when asked if light bothered them during a migraine attack. However, 91 percent of those same patients admitted they prefer to be in a darkened room during a headache.

Visual triggers refer to visual factors that can cause a migraine attack.

---

\(^1\) Katz B, Digre K. Diagnosis, Pathophysiology and Treatment of Photophobia. Survey of Ophthalmology. 2016.02.001
This is separate to the migraine aura which occurs during a migraine attack.

Several unofficial names are used to describe migraine auras and the visual changes which occur during migraine:

- Retinal migraine
- Ocular migraine
- Ophthalmic migraine

The symptoms may include:

- Blurred vision
- Temporary loss of vision or partial vision loss
- Double vision
- Cloudy vision
- Blind spots
- Sparkles of different colors
- Tunnel vision, or loss of peripheral vision
- Flickering light
- Jagged lights
- Flashes, spots, lines or other symptoms associated with aura
- Sensitivity to light, also called photophobia
- Illusions
- Sensitivity to visual patterns, such as stripes or graphs
- Distorted vision

Some of these symptoms may persist after the migraine attack has occurred, for days or weeks after the attack. If this is the case, it is recommended you see a specialist who works with light sensitive patients.

More reasons to manage this trigger

Overhead fluorescent lighting has been proven to be poor lighting for anyone, in terms of energy levels and productivity.

Colored lenses may be very useful. There has been research conducted by certain manufacturers of migraine-specific colored lenses that promises up to 80% of those with migraine using their lenses will experience some benefit from them.

Resources

- Visit axonoptics.com or theraspecs.com for globally available colored lenses designed especially for people living with migraine.
- Irlen online self-test for light sensitivity. Google “Irlen test”
- Find out more about visual problems relating to Irlen Syndrome.