

## IF YOU'RE A MIGRAINE SUFFERER LIKE 'DESPERATE HOUSEWIFE' **Marcia Cross**, THERE'S GOOD NEWS: YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A STAR TO GET RELIEF

**W**ith her first husband murdered, two manipulative kids who hate her and a new spouse with a shady history, you'd think Bree Van De Kamp would be a migraine sufferer. But in reality, it's Marcia Cross, the actress who plays Bree on *Desperate Housewives*, who suffers from the debilitating headaches.

"I got my first migraine around 14 when I was in high school," Cross says. "I got sent home in horrible pain. But I wasn't diagnosed for many years—maybe in my late 20s or early 30s."

Cross' story is not uncommon. Fewer than half of the 29.5 million migraine sufferers in the United States have received a diagnosis from their physician, according to the National Headache Foundation. So how do you know if you have migraines? And more important, is there anything you can do about it?

### **Not Just a Headache**

One theory is migraine headaches occur when nerves release chemicals that cause blood vessels on the surface of the brain to become irritated and swell. Pain is typically



**By Shelley Flannery**  
**Illustrations by Stephen Collins**



# quiet

DESPERATION

## WHO GETS MIGRAINES? WOMEN, MOSTLY. THEY ARE **three** **times more likely** TO BE AFFECTED BY MIGRAINES THAN MEN.

felt around the eyes and temples, but also may be present in the face, sinus, jaw or neck. A headache is only one of the symptoms of a migraine. Other symptoms include:

- ◆ Nausea or vomiting
- ◆ Visual disturbances
- ◆ Sensitivity to light, sound and odor
- ◆ Fatigue or confusion
- ◆ Feeling cold or sweaty
- ◆ Lightheadedness

Nearly one-fifth of migraine sufferers experience visual disturbances, or auras—which are characterized by seeing wavy lines, dots or flashing lights, or having blind spots—before the onset of their migraines. Cross is one of them.



“I have the odd aura thing that happens with my eyes, and often a tingling in my pinky,” Cross says. “I also have trouble remembering simple things like someone’s name who is standing right in front of me.”

### Profile of a Migraine Sufferer

Who gets migraines? Women, mostly. They are three times more

## Ahead of the Game

If it's more than just an occasional headache and you suspect you could be suffering from migraines, call your doctor. You can get a jump-start on understanding migraines at [headache.org](http://headache.org), which has information and links to other headache- and migraine-related websites.

## Should You Have Your Head Examined?

Your doctor generally diagnoses migraines through questions about your symptoms, history of headaches and family history of migraines. In some cases, a CT scan or an MRI will be ordered to rule out other causes of headache, such as blood clots or tumors.

Gretchen Tietjen, M.D., a spokeswoman for the American Academy of Neurology, recommends such diagnostic tests when:

- ◆ Other neurological symptoms are present, such as numbness, weakness or difficulty walking.
- ◆ Headache pattern or severity changes.
- ◆ An underlying condition is present, such as cancer or HIV.
- ◆ The onset of headaches is after age 50.





ABC's *Desperate Housewives* stars (from left) Eva Longoria as Gabrielle Solis, Felicity Huffman as Lynette Scavo, Marcia Cross as Bree Van De Kamp, Teri Hatcher as Susan Mayer and Nicollette Sheridan as Edie Britt.

likely to be affected by migraines than men. They are most commonly experienced between the ages of 15 and 55.

If you want to know whether you're at risk, ask your parents. Between 70 percent and 80 percent of migraine sufferers have a history of migraines in their family. "We believe that migraine is hereditary, a particular variation in a gene," says Arthur Elkind, M.D., president of the National Headache Foundation.

But just because migraines are typically passed from generation to generation doesn't mean you have to suffer like your grandmother did. Treatments are available.

### Pain, Pain, Go Away

The first step in finding relief is talking to your doctor. "There are many people who think it's just a headache, and they don't take them seriously," says Gretchen Tietjen, M.D., a spokeswoman for the American Academy of Neurology. "Talk to your doctor about your headaches. Many of them are very treatable."

"There are many treatments available today that weren't available 20 or 30 years ago," Elkind says. "And more are being developed all the time."

Treatments include over-the-counter and prescription medications taken at the onset of a migraine or on an ongoing basis, and biofeedback, in which patients train themselves to control the physical processes of stress, a top migraine trigger.

Another preventive treatment is trigger avoidance. Identifying and avoiding migraine triggers can be highly effective. Triggers include:

- ◆ Stress or anxiety
- ◆ Changes in weather or altitude
- ◆ Changes in sleep patterns or being tired
- ◆ Certain foods and beverages, including alcohol, aspartame, caffeine, cheese, chocolate and nuts
- ◆ Changes in hormone levels
- ◆ Intense physical activity

The best way to determine your triggers is to keep a diary. "There could be many things causing it," Elkind says. "Keep a diary of what you're eating and when you get a

## It's Not All in Your Head



If your headaches have prompted you to make an appointment with your doctor, be prepared to answer lots of questions about them. Before you go, it's a good idea to write down:

- ◆ How often they occur
- ◆ Where the pain is
- ◆ How long the headaches last
- ◆ When they happen, such as during your menstrual cycle
- ◆ Other symptoms, such as nausea or visual disturbances
- ◆ Any family history of migraines

Source: *The National Women's Health Information Center*

headache. If you have a headache every time you eat chocolate, you may want to avoid that."

As for Cross, her triggers are stress, red wine, chocolate, citrus and cheddar cheese. "I've been really lucky," she says. "I've only had one once at work, and that was 10 years ago now."

"It used to cause me anxiety, but that just made matters worse," she says. "Then I realized that they can always reschedule—the show will go on. Now I'm not worried about it at all." ■