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MODERN ASPECTS OF MIGRAINE MANAGEMENT

Akhmadov Jakhongir Akmal ugli

Asia International University, Bukhara, Uzbekistan.

Abstract: Migraine is a common and disabling neurological disorder characterized by recurrent attacks of moderate to severe headache often accompanied by nausea, vomiting, photophobia, and phonophobia. It affects approximately 15% of the global population and represents one of the leading causes of disability worldwide. Modern approaches to migraine management have evolved significantly with the advancement of knowledge about migraine pathophysiology, particularly the role of the trigeminovascular system and calcitonin gene-related peptide (CGRP). Contemporary treatment strategies focus on both acute attack relief and long-term prevention using pharmacological and non-pharmacological methods. Traditional therapies such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), triptans, beta-blockers, antidepressants, and antiepileptic medications remain widely used. However, the development of targeted therapies including CGRP monoclonal antibodies, gepants, and ditans has significantly transformed migraine management. Additionally, neuromodulation techniques and lifestyle-based interventions are gaining increasing importance in modern clinical practice. This article reviews current concepts in migraine pathophysiology, diagnostic criteria, and modern therapeutic approaches including pharmacological treatments, preventive strategies, and emerging innovative therapies.

Keywords: migraine, CGRP, gepants, triptans, monoclonal antibodies, neuromodulation, migraine therapy

Introduction

Migraine is a chronic neurological disorder characterized by recurrent episodes of headache and associated symptoms. It is one of the most prevalent neurological diseases worldwide and significantly contributes to global disability. According to epidemiological studies, migraine affects nearly 1 billion people worldwide and is particularly common among individuals between 15 and 49 years of age.

Migraine attacks typically last from 4 to 72 hours and are characterized by unilateral pulsating headache of moderate to severe intensity. These attacks are often aggravated by routine physical activity and accompanied by nausea, vomiting, photophobia, and phonophobia. In approximately 25–30% of patients, migraine is preceded by aura, which consists of transient neurological symptoms such as visual disturbances or sensory changes.

The International Classification of Headache Disorders (ICHD-3) classifies migraine into several subtypes, including migraine without aura, migraine with aura, chronic migraine, hemiplegic migraine, and retinal migraine. Chronic migraine is defined as headache occurring on 15 or more days per month for at least three months, with at least eight days fulfilling migraine criteria.

Understanding migraine pathophysiology has improved considerably over the last two decades. Previously, migraine was thought to be primarily a vascular disorder. However, modern research has shown that migraine is a complex neurovascular condition involving neuronal hyperexcitability, brainstem dysfunction, and activation of the trigeminovascular system.

Pathophysiology of Migraine

The pathophysiology of migraine involves multiple mechanisms including genetic predisposition, environmental triggers, and neurochemical alterations. One of the most widely accepted mechanisms is activation of the trigeminovascular system.

Cortical spreading depression (CSD) is considered a key process in migraine with aura. It is a wave of neuronal depolarization followed by suppression of neuronal activity that spreads across the cerebral cortex. This phenomenon leads to activation of trigeminal nerve fibers and the release of vasoactive neuropeptides.

The trigeminovascular system plays a central role in migraine pain generation. Activation of trigeminal nerve endings innervating cranial blood vessels results in the release of inflammatory neuropeptides such as calcitonin gene-related peptide (CGRP), substance P, and neurokinin A. These mediators cause vasodilation, neurogenic inflammation, and transmission of pain signals to higher brain centers.

CGRP has emerged as a key mediator in migraine pathogenesis. Elevated levels of CGRP have been detected during migraine attacks, and successful treatment often correlates with normalization of CGRP levels. These discoveries have led to the development of new targeted therapies that block CGRP or its receptor.

Clinical Manifestations

Migraine attacks often progress through four stages: prodrome, aura, headache, and postdrome.

The prodromal phase may occur hours or even days before the headache begins. Patients often experience symptoms such as fatigue, mood changes, neck stiffness, yawning, and food cravings.

Aura occurs in approximately one-third of patients and consists of transient neurological symptoms that usually develop gradually over several minutes. Visual aura is the most common type and may include flashing lights, zigzag lines, or blind spots. Sensory aura may present as tingling or numbness, while speech disturbances may also occur.

The headache phase represents the most disabling stage of migraine. The pain is typically unilateral, pulsating, and of moderate to severe intensity. It may worsen with physical activity and is frequently accompanied by nausea, vomiting, photophobia, and phonophobia.

The postdrome phase occurs after the headache resolves. Patients often report fatigue, cognitive difficulties, and mood changes during this recovery period.

Acute Treatment of Migraine

The main goal of acute migraine treatment is to relieve pain quickly, restore functional ability, and minimize recurrence of symptoms.

For mild to moderate migraine attacks, non-specific analgesics such as NSAIDs and acetaminophen are commonly used. Drugs such as ibuprofen, naproxen, and diclofenac reduce inflammation and inhibit prostaglandin synthesis, thereby alleviating headache pain.

For moderate to severe migraine attacks, triptans are considered first-line therapy. Triptans are selective serotonin 5-HT1B/1D receptor agonists that reduce migraine pain through several

mechanisms including cranial vasoconstriction, inhibition of neuropeptide release, and suppression of trigeminal nerve activity.

Commonly used triptans include sumatriptan, rizatriptan, zolmitriptan, and eletriptan. These medications are available in oral, nasal, and injectable forms. Although triptans are effective in many patients, they are contraindicated in individuals with significant cardiovascular disease because of their vasoconstrictive properties.

Newer medications known as ditans represent another option for acute migraine treatment. Lasmiditan is the first drug in this class and selectively activates 5-HT1F receptors without causing vasoconstriction. This makes it a safer alternative for patients with cardiovascular risk factors.

Gepants are small-molecule CGRP receptor antagonists that have been developed for both acute and preventive migraine treatment. Examples include ubrogepant, rimegepant, and zavegepant. These drugs block the action of CGRP and prevent activation of the trigeminovascular pathway.

Preventive Treatment

Preventive therapy is recommended for patients who experience frequent migraine attacks, prolonged disability, or inadequate response to acute treatments. The aim of preventive therapy is to reduce the frequency, severity, and duration of migraine attacks.

Traditional preventive medications include beta-blockers, antiepileptic drugs, antidepressants, and calcium channel blockers. Beta-blockers such as propranolol and metoprolol are among the most commonly prescribed agents and are believed to reduce migraine frequency through modulation of adrenergic activity.

Antiepileptic drugs such as topiramate and valproate are also effective in migraine prevention. These medications stabilize neuronal excitability and reduce cortical spreading depression.

Tricyclic antidepressants such as amitriptyline are frequently used in patients with coexisting depression or sleep disorders. Calcium channel blockers such as verapamil may also be beneficial in certain cases.

CGRP Monoclonal Antibodies

One of the most significant advances in modern migraine therapy is the development of monoclonal antibodies targeting CGRP or its receptor. These drugs represent the first class of migraine-specific preventive therapies.

Examples include erenumab, fremanezumab, galcanezumab, and eptinezumab. These medications are administered via subcutaneous or intravenous injection and typically require monthly or quarterly dosing.

Clinical trials have demonstrated that CGRP monoclonal antibodies significantly reduce the number of monthly migraine days and improve quality of life. They are generally well tolerated, with constipation and injection site reactions being the most commonly reported adverse effects.

Non-Pharmacological Management

Modern migraine management increasingly emphasizes the importance of non-pharmacological strategies.

Lifestyle modifications are essential in migraine prevention. Patients are advised to maintain regular sleep patterns, avoid known triggers, stay hydrated, and engage in regular physical activity.

Behavioral therapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy, relaxation training, and biofeedback can help patients manage stress and reduce migraine frequency.

Dietary modifications may also play a role. Some patients benefit from avoiding trigger foods such as chocolate, aged cheese, alcohol, and foods containing monosodium glutamate.

Neuromodulation

Neuromodulation technologies represent an innovative approach to migraine treatment. These devices use electrical or magnetic stimulation to modulate neural activity involved in migraine pathogenesis.

Examples include transcranial magnetic stimulation, transcutaneous vagus nerve stimulation, and external trigeminal nerve stimulation. These devices offer a non-invasive alternative for patients who do not respond well to pharmacological treatments.

Future Directions

Research in migraine treatment continues to evolve rapidly. Novel therapeutic targets such as pituitary adenylate cyclase-activating peptide (PACAP) are currently under investigation. Personalized medicine approaches using genetic and biomarker data may allow clinicians to tailor treatment strategies for individual patients.

Digital health technologies, including smartphone-based migraine tracking applications and telemedicine platforms, are also improving patient monitoring and management.

Conclusion

Migraine remains a highly prevalent and disabling neurological disorder that significantly impacts quality of life. Advances in understanding migraine pathophysiology have led to the development of innovative treatment approaches that target key molecular mechanisms such as CGRP signaling.

Modern migraine management requires a comprehensive strategy that includes acute treatment, preventive therapy, lifestyle modification, and patient education. The introduction of targeted therapies such as CGRP monoclonal antibodies, gepants, and ditans has revolutionized migraine care and offers new hope for patients with refractory disease.

Continued research into migraine mechanisms and emerging therapies will further improve clinical outcomes and contribute to the development of more personalized treatment strategies in the future.

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