As someone who suffers from migraines, it’s important to know everything there is to know about a possible symptom you could face before, during and after a migraine attack. Photophobia is a symptom frequently associated with migraines, but one many migraineurs aren’t fully aware of.

Why Should Migraineurs Understand Photophobia?

Photophobia, which is a scientific term for sensitivity to light, is a common neurological problem. Although it’s common, it’s often an undiagnosed symptom of migraines. According to a study that investigated the presence of photophobia during a migraine, many people denied light sensitivity when asked routine questions, like:

“Does light bother you during a headache?”

Those who answered no to the routine questions were then asked more detailed questions, like:

“During a headache, would you prefer to be in bright sunlight or in a dark room?”

Of the 85 patients who were questioned, 76% of them who were asked routine questions claimed to have light and sound sensitivity, but when they were further questioned, 93% of them claimed sensitivity.

Without the use of additional questions, 8% of the questioned patients would’ve been wrongly diagnosed.

*Photophobia isn’t always recognized among migraineurs. It’s important that you’re aware of all possible accompanying migraine symptoms, including whether you suffer from light sensitivity, so when your doctor asks you which symptoms you experience, you can give the most accurate answers to ensure you’re appropriately diagnosed.*
Migraine and Photophobia Go Hand-In-Hand

According to the International Classification of Headache Disorders, migraine is the most common neurologic disorder that causes photophobia and is one of the major disorders that physicians look for when diagnosing migraine. In fact, the majority of people who experience migraines have photophobia—thus proving light sensitivity is more important than is generally recognized and that more often than not, one doesn’t exist without the other.

With light sensitivity being a symptom of migraines, it’s no surprise that light, especially glare, has been reported as a migraine trigger. Along with things like skipping meals and stress, a controlled study found that bright lights caused headaches in 29% of those surveyed and aggravated headaches in 73%.

The brightness of the light isn’t the only factor to take into consideration; it’s about the volume of it over a period of time, too. This helps explain why some people’s light sensitivity varies by season, like having lower pain thresholds during the winter than the summer months. Studies also show that photophobia appears to get worse as the day progresses.

Sensory stimuli, specifically visual stimuli, is known to produce discomfort and provoke migraine. So what different visual triggers should you be aware of?

- Sunlight
- Flickering from screens and TVs
- Computer screens
- Fluorescent lights

Research shows photophobia is something most migraineurs have and that it triggers and aggravates migraine attacks.
Unlike Migraine, Photophobia is Constant

If you’ve suffered from a migraine attack, you know that eventually the pain goes away. So while it may last several days it’s not something you deal with 24/7—but photophobia is.

Migraineurs are more sensitive to light than those who don’t experience migraines. In a light-induced migraine study, migraine patients were more photophobic during a migraine attack, but even between attacks, they were more sensitive to light than the control subjects. 100% of the patients said they were sensitive during an attack, while 74% said they experienced light sensitivity outside of attack. The study also found that light sensitivity increases with migraine pain.

Additionally, photophobia associated with migraine lingers long after migraine pain and other symptoms have subsided.

These results further prove photophobia is an intrinsic property of migraineurs that doesn’t stop when migraine pain stops.

The brain of a migrainer processes light differently than those who don’t get migraines, whether or not they’re in the midst of a migraine attack.
Addressing Your Photophobia

Across the board, migraineurs with light sensitivity have lower pain thresholds. In a study that measured light and sound pain thresholds, patients with migraine headaches were more sensitive to light and sound during an attack compared to those who don’t have migraines.

There are different ways to reduce photophobia, including tinted lenses, medications and procedures.

Tinted Lenses

Many people with photophobia reach for a conventional pair of sunglasses to wear inside—that’s the last thing you should do to address light sensitivity.

Constantly wearing sunglasses inside puts you in a world of chronic darkness, which actually increases your light sensitivity.

There are, however, specially-tinted lenses that lessen the number of migraines people experience a month. They block the light that has been shown to aggravate migraines and light sensitivity.
Precision tinted lenses are the better route to go here. In a study done to evaluate light sensitivity thresholds, subjects with a light sensitive condition (called BEB) had lower thresholds than the normal control group. But the precision tinted lenses improved the patient’s severity of light sensitivity by 2x.

These specially tinted lenses effectively ease the pain and frequency of migraines, along with reducing light sensitivity in those with photophobia. People who suffer from migraines are extra sensitive to specific wavelengths of light, and these unique lenses help alleviate these symptoms by blocking the painful light from the good light.

**Systemic Medications**

While there is no cure for migraine, there are some preventative medications and treatments to help migraineurs feel better and reduce photophobia.

Treatments to lessen migraine attack frequency and severity involve taking certain preventive substances. Some proven-beneficial substances to help treat migraine-associated photophobia include:

- Beta-blockers
- Calcium channel blockers
- Anticonvulsants
- Antidepressants
- Serotonin antagonists.

If you suffer from acute attacks, there are non-specific anti-pain compounds or more migraine-specific treatments you can take. In most cases, acute migraines treated with migraine-specific medications have displayed a reduction in photophobia associated with acute attacks.

While these medications may work, you also risk the chance of suffering from rebound migraines, which overtaking medications can cause. Migraine sufferers who take medication for their migraine symptoms more than 2-3 days a week are highly likely to suffer from these headaches, also called medication-overuse headaches. Having more headaches leads to taking more medications—turning into a vicious pattern that’s harmful and prevents other treatments from effectively providing the relief you desire.
Procedures

The last way you can address photophobia is undergoing a handful of procedures.

One such technique involves receiving injections into the supraorbital nerve. These injections have been reported to reduce light sensitivity in patients who have undergone these procedures.

Other procedures inject alcohol into the orbit, which has helped reduce photophobia in cases of ocular inflammation, and botulinum toxin injections have proven to reduce photophobia and treat chronic migraine.

The top ways people address photophobia are tinted lenses, medications and procedures. While each way has proven to be helpful in providing relief, everyone is different and their bodies will react different to these approaches. It may take some trial and error before you learn which way works best for you.
Adopting a Holistic Approach

In order to truly address photophobia and receive the most beneficial relief, both drug-free and medicinal routes may be required.

Although doctors dictate that migraine is a physiological disorder and use medications to help with pain and symptoms, there are other factors to consider. A holistic approach involves looking at every aspect of your life—from your environment to your emotional stress—and turning to an all-encompassing treatment.

When pain hits, it makes sense to want a fast-acting solution, which is why you go to your doctor and take the medication he or she prescribes. But rather than focusing on solving the current pain problem, understand what’s causing your migraine and light sensitivity, and then take the necessary steps to help prevent it in the future.

Some natural, holistic approaches include:

- Changing your diet
- Taking herbal therapies \(\text{(feverfew, butterbur, ginger root)}\)
- Exercising more
- Getting a good night’s sleep every night \(\text{(or as often as you can)}\)
- Staying away from bright lights and glare
- Ridding stress from your life.

In order to know the best relief route you should take, you need to understand your unique triggers. Keep a trigger journal—whether an actual notebook, MigrainePal or the Migraine Buddy app—to narrow down which triggers you believe are the cause of your migraines, and then address those to help heighten your threshold of light sensitivity.

A medicinal approach alone isn’t always the right or best approach. But, when combined with a holistic approach, because it focuses on knowing what triggers cause your migraine and light sensitivity, taking this combined approach puts you on the path to helping prevent future attacks and providing needed relief.
If you’re a migraine sufferer who also experiences sensitivity to light, then you need...

Axon Optics Precision Tinted Lenses

Our eyewear blocks wavelengths of light known for triggering migraines and light sensitivity.

Don’t live in fear of your photophobia and banish yourself to a dark room.  
Get back out into the light—and actually enjoy it.