

## Coping with headache

On the list of symptoms and problems one faces after a traumatic brain injury, headache is probably the most commonly reported. Headaches are also a widespread problem among the general population — 95% of people have had a headache. For most people, a few over-the-counter pain pills resolve the problem. For others, headaches are a chronic condition responsible for frequent medical appointments, missed time at work or school, expensive medical treatments, and even disability.

A headache is defined as a pain or discomfort in the head, neck, or scalp. There are many causes for headaches. Headaches can be a primary disorder with no underlying disease process as the cause. However, headaches can also be a secondary diagnosis due to an underlying organic cause such as brain injury, hypertension, or depression. The person suffering with the headache pain can be very descriptive when trying to explain what the pain feels like. These descriptions are helpful for the primary care provider when trying to diagnose the cause of the headache.

### Types of headaches

A *tension headache* often is described as a “sensation of a rubber band squeezing the head,” or a “vice-like pressure on the forehead.”

Tension headaches can last for minutes or days and can happen frequently. These headaches are often the result of stress or bad posture which causes tightening of the muscles in the neck and the scalp. Tension headaches often worsen with noise and hot, stuffy environments.

*Migraine headaches* are intense and throbbing, often involve one side of the head, and can make you sensitive to light or noise. People experiencing a migraine might describe the pain as a “throbbing sensation like my heart is pounding in my head” or “like being inside a big bass drum.” Migraines last from hours up to three days. Some sufferers have an “aura” just before an attack. An aura is a group of symptoms that develop before the onset of the main headache. Migraines recur at intervals of varying length. Some people have attacks several times a month, others have less than one a year. There are two types of migraine: migraine with an aura and migraine without aura.

*Cluster headaches* are non-throbbing and usually are felt on one side of the head behind an eye. A person experiencing this kind of headache may describe the sensation “like an ice-pick



is being stabbed into the eye.”

These headaches can happen over several days and usually last 30 to 45 minutes. They generally occur between one and four times a day. Like migraines, cluster headaches are likely to be related to an increased

blood flow as a result of the blood vessels in the brain widening.

### Causes of headaches

Headaches are thought to be caused by changes in chemicals, nerves, or blood vessels in the area. These changes send pain messages to the brain and bring on a headache.

Some of the many potential headache triggers include:

- Certain medications (headaches are a potential side effect of some)
- Too little sleep or sudden changes in sleep patterns
- Skipping meals
- Becoming dehydrated
- Being under a lot of stress
- Having a minor head injury
- Using the computer or watching television for a long time
- Vision problems
- Menstruation
- Changes in hormone levels
- Taking a long trip in a car or bus
- Listening to really loud music
- Smoking
- Smelling strong odors such as perfume, smoke, fumes, or a new car or carpet
- Drinking or eating too much caffeine (in soda, coffee, tea, and chocolate)
- Consuming certain foods (such as alcohol, cheese, nuts, pizza, chocolate, ice cream, fatty or fried food, lunchmeats, hot dogs, yogurt, aspartame, or anything with the food additive MSG)

## Coping with headache *continued*

In some cases, headaches are caused by certain infections, such as:

- Ear infections
- Viral infections, like the flu or common cold
- Strep throat
- Sinus infections
- Lyme Disease

### **Treating headaches**

With the onset of headaches, you should always consult with a physician. There are, however, many treatments for headaches, both pharmaceutical options and non-pharmaceutical treatments in the event you can't be seen right away. Over-the-counter pain medications such as Tylenol, Motrin, or Aleve are effective for occasional headaches. Placing a cool cloth on the forehead and providing a dark, quiet environment can be soothing to the person experiencing pain.

A physician may prescribe narcotics, triptans, or anti-nausea medications. Recurrent headaches may warrant a referral to a headache specialist. These specialists may prescribe other therapies or drugs. Some of the classes of medications that can be used to treat headaches are antidepressants, anti-convulsants, beta-blockers, calcium channel blockers, oxygen therapy, or anti-nausea medications. These medications are used to prevent or decrease the severity and frequency of recurrent headaches.

### **Alternative therapies**

Alternative therapy treatments are also used for those who suffer with recurrent headaches. Acupuncture, biofeedback, meditation, stress management, massage and craniosacral therapy, chiropractic care, aromatherapy and herbal therapy all have a place in the treatment of chronic headaches. The primary care provider or headache specialist can make a referral to a reputable trained therapist. This is an important first step in using alternative therapy for recurrent headaches.

### **Healthy lifestyles**

Healthy lifestyle choices may also help prevent or decrease the severity of headaches. Eating healthy foods, getting regular exercise, avoiding caffeine and smoking, and getting enough sleep are measures you can take to minimize headache suffering. Taking time to relax, find humor and fun in your day, and enjoy life with those around you are important life lessons that will benefit anyone and help prevent headaches.

### **Conclusion**

One final comment about headaches is how important it is to recognize when a serious situation may be causing the head pain. When the headache is sudden and severe in onset and described as "the worst headache of my life," that headache needs emergent medical evaluation to make sure the individual is not experiencing a stroke or bleed in the brain.

Also, whenever a headache is associated with a high fever, nausea, vomiting, and stiff neck, that headache needs emergent medical evaluation. The individual could be experiencing meningitis, which is inflammation of the membranes that surround the brain or spinal cord, caused by infection.

For more information on headaches, please contact your primary care provider. You can also find reliable information at the following websites: [www.headache.org](http://www.headache.org) and [www.achenet.org](http://www.achenet.org). ❖

### *References:*

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<http://kidshealth.org/parent/general/aches/headache.html>

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