



## Headaches

### Fact:

Using some over-the-counter headache remedies can actually trigger more headaches.

### Fiction:

It's a myth that muscle tension causes tension headaches.

### Prevention:

Many techniques can help prevent headaches.

### Treatment:

Treatments range from relaxation to oxygen administered in a hospital.

Headaches can range from a minor annoyance to the intense and debilitating pain of "thunderclap" headaches.

## Understanding Headaches

Headaches include:

- Tension headaches, which generally don't have an underlying cause. They're probably caused by changes in brain chemicals that trigger nerves and blood vessels around the brain.
- Cluster headaches, intense headaches lasting one-half hour to three hours,\* which start around one eye and spread to nearby parts of the face. These headaches can occur in clusters for weeks or months. Researchers believe these headaches result from abnormal cell activity in the hypothalamus.
- Migraines, which typically cause a throbbing or pulsating pain in one or both sides of the head. Pain results from swelling in the blood vessels and nerves that surround the brain, probably caused by changes in brain chemicals and electrical activity in the brain stem, the primitive area of the brain. There is a connection with serotonin, a body chemical, and other serotonin-related disorders including depression and eating disorders that may be found in people with migraines.

## Who Has Headaches?

Tension headaches will affect 40% of people at some time. They may be episodic (less than 15 times a month) or chronic (more often).\*

Cluster headaches affect a million people, and are seven to eight times more common in men. Approximately 80% of these headaches occur at night, with 70% of these triggered by drinking alcohol.\*

Migraine affects up to 20% of us at some time, and after one migraine, they are likely to recur. Half of migraines first appear in childhood or adolescence. Two-thirds of sufferers are women; in many cases relief occurs after menopause.

## Headache Symptoms

Head pain and other symptoms differ by type of headache.

Someone having a tension headache may sense muscle tension, but there's no clear evidence that muscle tension causes these headaches. Symptoms include:

- Afternoon or evening headache
- Sense of tightness around the head
- Tight, sore neck and shoulder muscles
- Trouble concentrating and sleeping

Tension headaches last for a few hours or days. In chronic cases, sufferers may have tension headaches on most days.

With cluster headaches:

- Deep, explosive pain occurs around one eye or near the temple
- Pain builds to a maximum intensity in five minutes, then may spread to nearby parts of the face
- On the side with the headache, the eye may be bloodshot, tearing or have a smaller pupil or a drooping eyelid; and the nostril may be blocked or runny
- The face may be flushed and the patient nauseated

Migraine symptoms, which can last 4 to 12 hours but may last much longer, include:

- Throbbing pain on one or both sides of the head
- Nausea, vomiting or loss of appetite
- Sensitivity to bright light and loud noises
- Rarely, dizziness, vision loss, unconsciousness, numbness, weakness or tingling

In some cases, an unusual sensation called a prodrome precedes a migraine. Prodrome symptoms include fatigue, hunger and nervousness, as well as auras, which can be sudden blurry or distorted vision or seeing pulsating lights, that come and go over 15 to 30 minutes and may affect hearing, smell or taste.

Migraines can signal a serious underlying medical problem. Get medical attention\* for:

- Migraines that get worse
- New migraines in a person over 40
- Severe headaches that start suddenly (thunderclap headaches)
- Headaches that worsen with exercise, sexual intercourse, coughing or sneezing
- Unusual symptoms like passing out, loss of vision, difficulty walking or speaking
- Numbness that begins after a head injury
- Migraines that always occur on the same side of the head, or with other medical problems such as high blood pressure, cancer or AIDS
- Migraines if there's a family history of brain aneurysms

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## Prevention

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Relaxation techniques may help tension headaches, especially if used daily.

Generally, cluster headaches cannot be prevented.

Individuals with migraines should keep records of food, drink and activities that occur before headaches, then avoid these triggers. Common triggers include:

- Aged cheeses and meats
- Sulfites in wine
- MSG
- Hormone levels (monthly cycles or medication)
- Travel, weather and altitude changes
- Overuse of certain pain medication

Relaxation techniques may help prevent episodes. These include biofeedback, yoga, acupuncture, massage and regular exercise. Doctors often prescribe a

regular medication to prevent migraines.

Ironically, some migraine triggers are contradictory. Triggers can include:

- Too much caffeine (such as coffee or colas) or cutting back on caffeine
- Stress or relief from stress (for instance, the headache may strike either before or after the big exam)
- Too much sleep, too little sleep or disrupted sleep

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## Treatment

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Once a tension headache begins, it may help to avoid bright lights and loud noises. Massage of tight areas in the neck and shoulders, and relaxation techniques, may help.

Unlike with migraines, it may help cluster headaches to keep moving. They may require prescription medication and even inhalation of pure oxygen to shorten the headache.

For some people with migraine, pain relievers or analgesics are enough to treat the headache. Ice packs may help. Other people require prescription medications. Some medications are taken regularly to prevent headaches, while others are taken once the patient senses a migraine is coming on. Antidepressants can help chronic headaches.

\* IntelliHealth

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