

HEADACHES



Headache is a common symptom, and of course it is easy to treat by taking a pain-killer, especially if it surfaces right before an important meeting. Correct?

Wrong! Dealing with a pain in the head should cause no side-effects nor should it merely mask the pain while forgetting to deal with what's causing it. To begin handling your headache you need to know what type of headache you have.

If it's a migraine

A migraine headache usually involves only one side of the head, is violent and acute and it is often preceded by what is called an aura which includes flashing lights, strange smells, inability to speak, numbness, etc. Sufferers may feel sick or have diarrhoea during or just before an attack. Sometimes migraine is associated with types of foods or situations or may have a weekly or monthly cycle which may last from a few hours to several days. Bed rest may be needed in severe cases.

Successful self-help means finding the cause which could include food, alcohol, allergy or low blood pressure as well as stress. It may also relate to ongoing yeast infection.

If caused by an allergy then remember the main culprits are dairy products, eggs,

wheat, food additives and some meats. Foods commonly involved are those rich in tyramine, a product of the amino-acid, tyrosine. They include cheese, wine, chocolate and smoked foods. Stop eating those. A good idea is to eliminate dairy foods and wheat-based foods, if you take them, and to observe your headache pattern. If it continues as before, then the chances are that none of these foods are implicated. If symptoms do improve during the period of exclusion, then you can carefully begin re-introducing these foods one at a time, observing your reactions.

If you eat a particular food for two consecutive days without a headache appearing, it is probably okay to keep it in the diet. If symptoms do come through, then the offending food should be avoided for at least six months. Continue checking food culprits this way until you identify all the allergens.

If it is low blood sugar

Headaches can be connected to low blood sugar too. Are you very lethargic when you get up in the morning? Do you get up feeling shaky and light-headed when approaching meal times?

Do you crave for sugary and carbohydrate type foods? Do you feel exhausted mid-morning, or mid-afternoon? If you skip a meal do you feel physically or emotionally unwell? And, do you use tea, coffee, chocolate, cola-drinks or tobacco to give yourself a 'lift' during the day?

If your answer is yes (more than once a week) or sometimes (at least once a week) to both the questions it could be a problem you need to tackle.



There are tests which can prove that you are hypoglycemic. You should stop all sugar-rich foods and drinks, including fruit drinks as well as refined carbohydrates, all tea, coffee, colas, alcohol, chocolate and tobacco. Eat four or five small meals a day and ensure a good intake of protein and complex (unrefined) carbohydrates.

Never skip breakfast. Stress levels should be reduced and do not overexert when exercising. Nuts and cheese are high-protein snacks which will help.

Tension headaches

The pattern of tension and muscle pain headaches is such that they are usually frequent – often every day – like a band being played both on top of and/or at the base of the skull. It is described as a ‘halo’ pain. Such headaches usually accompany anxiety or depression and are largely unaffected by pain-killing drugs.

Where muscles are involved, as in the majority of cases, tension frequently starts in the jaw. Check when you grind your teeth, clench the jaw or bite the insides of your cheeks. These headaches may be accompanied by a feeling of stiffness in the neck as well as pain in the eyes or ears. Relaxation techniques is the best way of dealing with this type of headache.

Headache check



When does it start?

- If your headache is there already or soon after awakening and gets worse as the day progresses, or if it is probably caused by something ‘mechanical’.
- If it is unremitting, often daily, then you may have a large amount of stress or anxiety to deal with.
- If headaches begin in the evening they almost certainly come from muscular tension.

Also note that if a headache comes on very suddenly like a blow on the head you should ask a doctor to check the cause.

How long?

- If your headache is very short-lived, it is probably not serious. If it happens several times a week it is also unlikely to have major implications.

Location of Pain

- If the pain is focussed largely on your forehead or base of the skull, then the neck muscle or a ligament stress is the likely cause. If it is one-sided it is likely to be a genuine migraine.

Starting and aggravating factors

- Look for clues. Does your headache start or get worse after drinking alcohol? Does a particular food, a strained or tensed posture or a certain activity, injury or having a temperature starts it?
- Does stress aggravate it? If so, tense muscles may be causing it.
- Does bending down aggravate it? If so, sinus problems are likely.
- Does sneezing aggravate it? If so, consult a doctor to check causes.

What makes it better or eases it?

- If your headache improves with sleep then tension is probably causing it. As a check but not as a recommendation, these sort of headaches as well as those resulting from arthritic changes in the neck will be relieved by aspirin, while migraine will be untouched by aspirin-type pain killers.

When you need help

- If your headache is aggravated by sneezing, coughing or vomiting or if it comes as if a blow is being struck on your head, you should consult a doctor. The same applies if the headache is associated with a fever, unexplained weight loss, memory loss, double vision, dizziness, loss of hearing, speech and walking difficulties, changes in bowel, bladder or sexual function or, in the case of women,

menstruation difficulties.

- Extreme urgency is called for if the headache appears very suddenly, especially in someone around or over 65, accompanied by swollen arteries on the head (often in the temple area), usually affecting both sides of the head (or base of the skull area), or accompanied by sweating and fever.
- If the headache is there on awakening and eases with rest and is accompanied with vomiting, if coughing or sneezing makes it worse and if drowsiness accompanies and if the headache causes a very sharp pain periodically.
- Any sudden onset of headache in anyone over 65 should be checked.