

# HEADACHES

Headache is the most common type of pain for which people visit a doctor. The majority of headaches are not serious. A headache can be an isolated problem, or it can be associated with a variety of medical conditions. The most common of these are viral infections causing colds and flu-like illnesses, fevers, and head injuries.

## SOME CAUSES OF HEADACHES

- Upper respiratory infection (e.g. a cold, Strep throat, sinus infection)
- Fever
- Stress
- Dehydration
- Sleep Deprivation
- Head Injury

If a headache is associated with cold symptoms, it can often be relieved by rest, use of acetaminophen or ibuprofen, or treatment of nasal or sinus congestion with pseudoephedrine (Sudafed®).



Headaches associated with fevers usually improve significantly when the body's temperature goes down. However, if an individual has a severe headache with a fever and/or it is associated with a stiff neck, he or she should seek immediate medical attention to rule out the possibility of meningitis (even if he/she has had a meningitis vaccine).

Injuries to the head often cause headaches. A head injury may result from a fall, a blow to the head, a car accident, or a sports accident. Headaches following head trauma can be mild, easily relieved with acetaminophen (the best choice of a pain reliever to use after a head injury), or severe, possibly indicating a serious consequence of the injury such as bleeding inside the head. Individuals who sustain any significant injury to the head should obtain medical evaluation.

Many headaches are unrelated to illness or injury and are caused by stress. They are often associated with muscle tightness in the neck, shoulders and scalp. These headaches can be relieved with rest, stress management strategies such as exercise and relaxation, massage, and/ or over the counter pain medications.

Stress also contributes significantly to a specific type of headache called migraine. Migraine headaches are frequently more severe than other types and can be debilitating. Migraine pain is usually experienced on one side of the head

and frequently felt in the temple, forehead, and eye area, but the pain can also affect both sides and other areas of the head. Migraine sufferers often are very sensitive to light and noise and feel most comfortable lying down in a dark, quiet room. Nausea and vomiting can occur with severe migraines. These headaches are sometimes associated with visual changes that may include having blind spots or seeing flashes of light, dizziness, and/or with a sensation of numbness in a hand or on part of the face. Rarely, migraines can cause neurologic symptoms such as weakness or paralysis of an arm or leg.

Some people who experience migraines regularly can identify a trigger that sets off their headaches. For example, drinking red wine or completing an exam after staying up many nights studying can precipitate a migraine. For some people, a combination of several factors leads to a headache. These factors may include physical or emotional stress, a change in the weather (really!), hormonal changes such as those that occur at the onset of menstruation, and consumption of particular foods.

Some Triggers Are:

- Bright lights and flashing lights
- Physical stress (lack of sleep, irregular meals, extreme exertion)
- Emotional stress
- Foods containing the amino acid Tyramine (e.g. aged cheese, nuts)
- Foods containing sodium nitrite (e.g. hot dogs, bologna, other processed or preserved meats)
- Food additives and flavorings (e.g. Aspartame (NutraSweet®), MSG, Soy Sauce)
- Alcohol
- Falling barometric pressure
- Hormonal changes

Keeping a headache “diary” which records when headaches occur along with recent foods eaten, stresses, time of menstrual cycle and weather patterns can help identify personal triggers. One can then try to avoid those triggers to help prevent future headaches.

Migraines can be relieved by sleep, analgesics, analgesics plus caffeine such as the combination in Excedrin® Migraine, and by specific prescription medications. The latter can be prescribed by a healthcare provider, as can preventive medications for those experiencing frequent headaches.

#### **WHEN TO SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION FOR HEADACHES:**

- THE WORST HEADACHE IN YOUR LIFE
- SEVERE HEADACHE ASSOCIATED WITH A FEVER AND/OR A STIFF NECK
- YOU ARE EXPERIENCING NEUROLOGIC SYMPTOMS (e.g. weakness in one area of the body, inability to speak normally, visual changes)

- SEVERE HEADACHES ASSOCIATED WITH A HEAD INJURY
- HEADACHES INCREASING IN FREQUENCY AND SEVERITY

Carol Rappaport, MD, 2004

---

### **Helpful Links:**

For more information about headaches and migraines, see the following web sites:

The American Academy of Family Physicians patient information web site at <http://familydoctor.org/x5099.xml>

The National Headache Foundation's patient and healthcare professional information web site at <http://www.headaches.org/>

© 2004-06 Emory University, Atlanta, GA