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# Causes Of Headaches And Treatments

We all experience headaches at one time or another - whether it be due to an attack of influenza, the result of too much alcohol, stress or the pressure of work. Only occasionally is a headache a sign of more serious illness such as a brain tumour, stroke or cancer. Headaches that have recurred for many years are almost never due to serious underlying causes. Headaches are one of the most common reasons why people visit their GP. There are several types of headaches and many different triggers.

### Common types of headache



Most recurring headaches are either migraines or tension headaches. Migraine headaches last for hours to days, are severe enough to stop you working and can make you feel nauseated or cause you to vomit. One striking characteristic of migraines is their unpredictable nature. They often appear without warning and without any apparent trigger. They can be very frequent (one or two attacks per month) or very rare (one or two attacks in a lifetime). Migraines may run in your family. Around 10 per cent of people suffer from migraine at some time.

Tension headaches are less severe but more people suffer from them. They feel like a pressure sensation or band around the head and are also felt in the neck and shoulders. Tension headaches can occur every day and may last for days or weeks at a time.

### Other types of headache

- Cluster headaches - usually felt around the eyes or temples. These headaches often occur in clusters for months at a time and then disappear for months at a time
- Episodic headaches - cause severe throbbing in the back of the head
- Sinus headaches - cause pain in the forehead, temples and eyes. They are caused by sinus congestion, often due to a cold, allergy or changes in weather

### What causes headaches?

Usually it's not difficult to determine the trigger of a headache. By carefully looking back at what you were doing, what you were eating and where you were immediately before experiencing the headache, you will probably be able to determine its trigger. It may have been due to a poor night's sleep, a busy day or stress at home. We do not know what causes the pain of migraine. Pain occurs when part of the body is injured or inflamed. Headaches occur when the tough protective coverings that envelope the brain are affected, but the precise mechanism that causes the constriction of blood vessels surrounding the brain, and tension in the scalp and muscles, is not known.

Tension headaches are often associated with excessive contractions and spasms of neck and scalp muscles. A

regular programme of daily massage can often help reduce these spasms. However, spasms can occur with any form of headache and do not explain why tension headaches occur.

### **What triggers headaches?**

Although we don't know exactly what causes headaches, we do know that certain factors can trigger them. These triggers vary from person to person (see box at bottom of the article).

You should keep a headache diary in order to work out the factors triggering your headaches. Write down what you were doing, where you were and what you were eating immediately prior to each headache. After two or three months you should be able to see a pattern emerging. If you can isolate your triggers then you can reduce the number of headaches you get by avoiding the triggers.

### **What treatment is available?**

Today there are very effective treatment measures. If you suffer from occasional, mild headaches you can safely take aspirin, paracetamol or ibuprofen. Ibuprofen has been shown to be particularly effective in reducing headache pain. However, if you develop an unusually severe headache or one with a sudden onset, you should seek urgent advice from your GP.

You should also talk to your GP if your headaches have only started recently and you are over the age of 50, or if they are worse with coughing, sneezing or physical activity.

Even if you avoid whatever triggers your headaches, you may still need medication to control more severe attacks. You may need to work with your GP to find the type of medication that suits you. Your GP will also tell you about any possible side effects. Medications need to be used carefully because some of the common painkillers can actually bring on headaches if used excessively (for example, every day). If your headaches occur this frequently, your GP will be able to advise you about prevention medication (ie medication you can take whether you have a headache or not).

### **Prevention techniques**

Don't underestimate the effect that stress and worry can have. There are many forms of stress management techniques such as yoga, meditation and relaxation tapes. Choose a form of relaxation you enjoy and do it on a regular basis. You will get limited benefit only practicing once or twice a week.

At work, take regular breaks (try 20 seconds of stretching every 20 minutes). Make sure you take time out to have lunch. Ensure that the lighting in your work area is even and not flickering. If you work under fluorescent lighting, buy a small desk lamp for your work area.

### **Common headache trigger factors**

- \* Changes in routine, such as oversleeping or starting shift work
- \* Alcohol. Red wine, beer, brandy and whisky contain certain additives which can trigger headaches. Too much alcohol results in dehydration and poor quality sleep
- \* Caffeine. Drinking less coffee or tea than usual can cause a headache that is brought on by caffeine withdrawal
- \* Hunger. Low blood sugar can cause headaches. People who don't eat breakfast may develop a morning headache
- \* Emotional factors, such as stress, depression or frustration Headaches can also occur after stress is relieved
- \* Weather. Some people develop a headache just before a storm, in humid weather or in a biting wind

- \* Your environment. Bright or flickering lights and glare, as well as stuffy rooms or excessive noise, can trigger headaches
- \* Physical complaints. Wearing a tight hair band, toothache or eye strain can bring on a headache
- \* Car travel, due to motion or the headlights from oncoming cars
- \* Neck pain or injury
- \* Sinus problems. Blocked sinuses can cause a feeling of pressure in the nose and cause a headache
- \* Allergies, such as food allergies (particularly in children)
- \* Hormones. Some women find their headaches occur at certain stages of their menstrual cycle or at menopause
- \* Some medications. Even pain killers can have a rebound effect

### **Useful contacts**

#### **International Myeloma Foundation**

Address: 31 Dunedin Street, Edinburgh, EH7 4JG

Telephone: 0131 557 3332

Helpline: 0800 980 3332

Email: [myelomauk\[at\]myeloma.org.uk](mailto:myelomauk[at]myeloma.org.uk)

Website URL: [myeloma.org.uk](http://myeloma.org.uk)

#### **Migraine Action Association**

Address: 4th Floor, 27 East Street, Leicester, LE1 6NB

Telephone: 0116 275 8317

Email: [info\[at\]migraine.org.uk](mailto:info[at]migraine.org.uk)

Website URL: [migraine.org.uk](http://migraine.org.uk)

#### **PMS Help**

Address: PO Box 83, Hereford, HR4 8YQ

#### **The Migraine Trust**

Address: 52-53 Russell Square, London, WC1B 4HP

Telephone: 0207 631 6970

Fax: 0207 436 2888

Email: [info\[at\]migrainetrust.org](mailto:info[at]migrainetrust.org)

Website URL: [migrainetrust.org](http://migrainetrust.org)

**The Neurological Alliance**

Address: 165 Queen's Gate, London, SW7 5HE

Telephone: 0207 584 6457

Email: [admin\[at\]neural.org.uk](mailto:admin@neural.org.uk)

Website URL: [neural.org.uk](http://neural.org.uk)

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