

Headaches

What are headaches?

Headache pain occurs in the tissues covering the brain, and in the muscles and blood vessels around the scalp, face, and neck. The brain itself is insensitive to pain. The three most common headaches are tension or muscle contraction, migraine, and cluster. It is not uncommon for someone to experience a combination of these headaches. We will concentrate on tension headaches in this discussion because there are several things that you can do to relieve or control this type of headache.

What is a tension headache?

Most people say tension headaches cause a constant, dull, achy feeling on both sides of the head. Some people with tension headaches describe a tight or band like feeling around the head or knot in the neck muscles. Tension headaches usually begin slowly and gradually. They often start in the middle of the day. Tension-type headaches may be mild or severe.

What causes a tension headache?

The most common cause of tension headaches is muscle contraction in the head, neck, and shoulders in response to stress, fatigue, or environmental factors like noise or bright light. Pain can last long after the muscles have relaxed. Sometimes the headache doesn't even start until long after a stressful event is over. Headaches that occur at night or early morning may be related to sleep disorders.

When to seek medical help:

Seek medical attention if you have a headache associated with a fever, stiff neck, rash, double vision or mental confusion or if you are over 55 and experience a new headache that is sudden and severe.

How are headaches diagnosed?

Your health care provider often can tell what kind of headache you have from hearing your description of the pain and by examining you. Blood tests, x-rays or scans are usually not needed.

What can I do to ease my headaches?

- Put a heat pack or an ice pack on your head or neck to ease the pain.
- Take a hot shower to ease the pain.
- Get enough rest or sleep.
- Take time away from things that are stressful. This could mean anything from taking a brief walk to going on a long vacation.
- Get regular exercise of all types.
- Talk to people about things that bother you.
- See a counselor to learn how to express your feelings.
- Practice some form of meditation or relaxation.
- Learn to use deep breathing techniques, visualization, and meditation to relieve stress.

If these measures don't provide relief...

Your provider may put you on some medication to lessen the intensity and frequency of your headaches such as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). There are dozens of NSAIDs. Aspirin is the most common for adults; others include ibuprofen (Advil and Motrin), and naprosyn (Aleve). Your provider may also prescribe a combination drug or an antidepressant, which can be useful in preventing tension headaches.