

# MIGRAINE AND TENSION HEADACHES

## Health notes



### Tips for coping with the pain

Do you have headaches? If you do, you are not alone. More than 9 in 10 adults will experience a headache sometime in their life<sup>1</sup>. If you are like many people, you have learned to live with your headaches. There are many things you can do to lessen how often you get headaches and how severe they are. In this health note, you will learn about the different types of headaches, what causes them and what you can do to get quick relief.

### Understanding the pain

Headaches occur when the brain sends a pain signal that causes irritation of the bones, blood vessels, and muscles in your head. From this signal, the brain is able to pinpoint where and how bad the pain is.

### Causes of headaches

Most headaches are caused by tension and can be treated with self-care. Other possible causes of headaches are infection, allergy, hunger, changes in blood flow in vessels of the head, or response to chemicals.

### Tension headaches

Tension headaches may result from emotional or physical stress. These headaches are described often as a dull, tight feeling in the head. Pain can also involve the neck, shoulder, jaw, and upper back. Tension headaches are caused by tension in the muscles of the head, neck, forehead, and temples.

#### Do you have a tension headache?

- Does the pain feel like tightness around your head?
- Do you also have pain in your neck or shoulders?
- Do you get a headache after doing one activity, such as driving or typing, for a long time?
- Do you often clench your jaw or grind your teeth?

- Can you continue your daily activities despite the headache?

If you have answered yes to two or more of the questions above, you may be having tension headaches. Tension headaches may occur from time to time or daily. A tension headache causes a constant ache and tightness around the forehead, temples, or the back of the head and neck.

### Migraine headaches

Many people consider any bad headache a migraine, but migraine headaches have very specific symptoms. They include:

- throbbing pain on one or both sides of the head,
- being sensitive to light or noise, and
- nausea

Attacks can last for several hours and, in some cases, for days. Certain foods or additives can trigger these headaches. Most people first begin having migraine headaches during their teens and early 20's. We do not know what causes migraines. Some people with migraine headaches have warning symptoms, called aura, before the onset of the headache. These warning signs include blind spots, flashing lights, numbness of the arms, funny smells, dizziness, and nausea.

#### Do you have a migraine headache?

- Do you feel pain clearly on one side of your head?
- Do you see flashes of lights or bright spots before your headache starts?
- Do you have headaches at the same time every week or month?
- Do your headaches begin after a specific event?
- Do your headaches cause nausea or vomiting?
- Does physical activity, especially bending, make your headache worse?

If you have answered yes to two or more of the questions above, you may be having migraine headaches. Migraine headache are painful, throbbing headaches that usually last from four to 72 hours. When you have a migraine, it may be so painful that you cannot follow your normal routine, or do your usual activities.

## Headache treatment

At the first sign of a headache, take time to care for it, if possible. Find a quiet, cozy place to sit or lie down and relax or sleep. If pain continues, an ice pack on the forehead or area of greatest pain may help. If you are having muscle spasm and tightness of the neck, a heating pad and massage to this area may be helpful.

Treatment for tension and migraine headaches may include over-the-counter medicines, like aspirin or ibuprofen, or prescription medicines. Talk to your doctor about what would be best for you.

If you take headache medicines, do not overuse these pain relievers. Overuse may result in a worse headache, called a rebound headache. If not taken as recommended,

both over-the-counter and prescribed headache medicines can cause this problem. Be sure to follow your doctor's advice.

## Self-care and prevention

### Keep a headache diary

Keeping a headache diary can help you understand your personal headache triggers. In a headache diary, you record information such as how often you get headaches, how long they last, and whether certain foods or situations seem to cause them. The diary helps you see your personal headache patterns. Then, you can decrease headaches by reducing your triggers and taking medicines, if needed.

Make several copies of this chart to keep track of your headaches over an extended period. Sometimes patterns will take weeks and maybe months to appear. Remember to keep your diary in a place you can easily access. By keeping a diary, you and your doctor will be able to treat your headaches.

	First headache	Second headache	Third headache	Fourth headache
Date & time headache began				
Time headache ended				
Warning signs (aura)				
Location of pain				
Type of pain (neck pain, pain on one side of the head)				
Intensity of pain (1-10) 1-mild, 10-severe				
Other symptoms (nausea, vomiting)				
Important or stressful events that occurred that day				
Food and drinks for the day				
Medicine	_____	_____	_____	_____
Dosage	_____	_____	_____	_____
Time taken	_____	_____	_____	_____
Comments				

## Eating well

By tracking when your headache occurs, you may begin to note specific foods that trigger them. Fasting, for instance, may bring on headaches in some people. Some of the most common headache-causing foods include:

- alcohol (especially red wine),
- aged cheese (e.g. cheddar, parmesan),
- chocolate,
- nitrites (for example, salt),
- monosodium glutamate (MSG),
- caffeine,
- Aspartame (such as Equal®, NutraSweet®), and
- tobacco smoke.

## Get active

As with healthy eating habits, physical activity is a simple way to improve your overall health and reduce stress. Regular daily exercise and stretching can help prevent headaches by decreasing stress and tension. There are many types of exercise, such as dancing, aerobics, and swimming. Try several until you find physical activities that you enjoy and that suit your lifestyle. Be sure to talk to your doctor about the right level of activity for you.

## Managing your stress

Many people with headaches are able to decrease how often their headaches occur by learning to relax and manage stress. Skills such as slow deep breathing, meditation, and guided imagery can help with pain management. Talk to your doctor about stress management or sign up for our Stress Management class by calling the Health Education department at (301) 816-6565 or 1-800-444-6696.

## Perfect your posture

People with stiff necks and poor posture often have headaches. If you sit most of the day, get up once an hour to walk and stretch your neck muscles. If you work at a computer, adjust your monitor so that the top of the screen is at eye level. If you use the telephone a lot, consider getting a headset or speakerphone.

## Look at your daily activities

The body loves routines, especially when it comes to eating and sleeping. Try to wake up and go to sleep at about the same time everyday, even on weekends, and vacations. Be sure to keep your energy constant by eating regularly throughout the day and avoiding foods that may cause headaches.

## Migraines and women

Migraines occur more often in women than in men. Certain hormonal changes during puberty may influence migraine headache attacks in women. Headache attacks may occur several days before, during, or right after a woman's menstrual period. Some women find their migraine attacks worsen while they are on birth control pills or use hormone replacement therapy (HRT) after hysterectomy or menopause. Pregnancy also influences migraines. Many women with migraines find their attack disappear completely, occur less often, or are milder during pregnancy.

<sup>1</sup> *National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (2010). National Institutes of Health. [www.ninds.nih.gov](http://www.ninds.nih.gov).*

## For more information

### Visit [kp.org/healthyliving/mas](https://kp.org/healthyliving/mas)

- Use our online tools, calculators and sign up for a healthy living class.

### Visit [kp.org/health](https://kp.org/health)

- Search for headaches, migraines, and tension headaches in the Health Encyclopedia.

### Visit [kp.org/careforpain](https://kp.org/careforpain)

- Use this online program to help you manage your pain.

## Call Kaiser Permanente Medical Advice

- Talk to your medical advice nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week at (703) 359-7878 or 1-800-777-7904; TTY: (703) 359-7616 or 1-800-700-4901, or talk to your personal doctor or member of health care team at your next regular visit.

## Other resources

### National Headache Foundation

- [www.headache.org](http://www.headache.org)

### American Council for Headache Education

- [www.achenet.org](http://www.achenet.org)

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent medical problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your personal physician or member of your health care team.

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