



Types of headaches

❖ Tension headaches

About 90% of all headaches can be classified as *tension headaches*. A tension headache causes a constant ache and tightness around the forehead, temples, or the back of the head and neck. Usually, pain from a tension headache is mild to moderate and doesn't keep you from doing your daily tasks. But the pain may be severe or ongoing, making it hard to do your normal activities.

❖ Migraine headaches

Many people consider any bad headache a migraine, but *migraine headaches* have specific symptoms. They include throbbing pain on one or both sides of the

head, sensitivity to light and noise, as well as nausea and/or vomiting. With this kind of headache, pain is usually worse with exertion. Attacks can last for several hours and, in some cases, linger for days. These headaches are triggered by certain foods, changes in weather, too much or too little caffeine, not enough sleep, stress, and lack of exercise. Current thinking is that a combination of genetic factors and environmental factors trigger migraines. Some people with migraine headaches have warning symptoms called aura before the onset of the headache. These can include blind spots, flashing lights, numbness, unusual smells, and emotional changes.

❖ Cluster headaches

Cluster headaches are not as common as migraine headaches and affect less than 1% of the population. The most common symptom of a cluster headache is an explosive pain usually occurring around one eye, the temples, or the forehead. This type of headache appears daily for weeks or months in groups, or clusters. In between these clusters, the cluster headache sufferer may be free of pain for months or years. Cluster headaches are more common in men than women. The severe pain of the cluster headache may trigger feelings of desperation and isolation. Most cluster headaches can be successfully treated.

Headache treatments

❖ Taking medications

The treatment for *tension headaches* can include over-the-counter medications (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDs, like aspirin, naproxen, acetaminophen, and ibuprofen) and some prescription medications.

The treatment for *migraine headaches* includes over-the-counter NSAIDs (like aspirin, naproxen, acetaminophen, and ibuprofen), anti-nausea medicines, and triptan medicines such as sumatriptan.

If you think you might have *cluster headaches*, you need to consult with your medical provider.

If you take headache medications, follow your doctor's directions and avoid taking more than prescribed. Overuse (almost daily use) can result in a worse headache, called a *rebound headache*, through a process called "central sensitization." Both over-the-counter and prescription headache medications can cause this problem if they are taken too often. For example, the use of NSAID medicines should be limited to 2-3 days per week, while triptan use should be limited to 1-2 days per week. If you are taking headache medicines frequently, talk with your doctor about a preventative medication. Be sure to follow your doctor's directions.

❖ **Eating well**

By tracking when your headache occurs, you may begin to note specific foods that trigger your headache. Migraines often respond to changes in diet. Not only can specific foods trigger a headache, but also dietary habits can play a role. Fasting, for instance, may bring on headaches in some people. Some of the most common headache-causing foods include:

- caffeine
- alcohol
- chocolate
- aged cheeses (e.g., cheddar, parmesan)
- nitrites
- MSG (monosodium glutamate)
- aspartame

❖ **Using physical activity**

As with diet, physical activity is a simple and natural way to improve your overall health and reduce your stress. Regular daily exercise and stretching can prevent headaches by decreasing stress and tension. There are many types of exercise, and it is best to experiment until you find physical activities that you enjoy and that

suit your lifestyle. Be sure to get a thorough medical checkup before making any drastic changes in your physical activity level.

❖ **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 with your medical professional for help with stress management, log onto **kp.org**, or contact your Health Education Center or Department.

Migraines and women

Migraines occur 3 times more often in women than in men. Migraines commonly occur around a woman's menstrual period but also may occur at ovulation. Oral contraceptives may also affect the frequency of migraine headaches. If you find that your headaches worsen while you are on the pill or taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT), check with your medical professional. Many women with migraines find their attacks disappear completely, occur less often, or are milder during pregnancy.

Call 911 or other emergency services right away if your headache:

- Is a dramatically different type of headache than you have had before.
- Is a “thunderclap” headache—terrible pain within seconds to minutes.
- Feels like your worst headache ever (especially if it happens suddenly).
- Comes with other signs like numbness or weakness, dizziness or difficulty walking, memory loss, sudden changes in vision, sudden difficulty speaking or understanding simple statements.
- Fever and very stiff neck.
- New nausea and vomiting or you cannot keep food or liquids down.
- If you are older than 50 and have new or more frequent headaches.

Other resources

- Look for the **Managing Your Headaches** link on your doctor's homepage at **kp.org/mydoctor**.
- Some conditions, including headaches or migraines can be brought on by or affected by violence or abuse. If you are hit, hurt or threatened by a partner or spouse, there is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to **ndvh.org**.

If you have an emergency medical condition, call 911 or go to the nearest hospital.

An emergency medical condition is (1) a medical or psychiatric condition that manifests itself by acute symptoms of sufficient severity (including severe pain) such that you could reasonably expect the absence of immediate medical attention to result in serious jeopardy to your health or body functions or organs; or (2) active labor when there isn't enough time for safe transfer to a Plan hospital (or designated hospital) before delivery, or if transfer poses a threat to your (or your unborn child's) health and safety.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.