

WHAT IS A HEADACHE?

HEADACHES

Everybody gets it - some people get it very regularly while others hardly ever get a headache. Some people suffer so much from headaches that they cannot function while some function normally. Some can pin-point exactly where it is, others complain about a generalised dull pain. There are different kinds of headaches with different classifications and some headaches may be an indication of a problem somewhere in the body.

WHO GETS IT?

- Headaches are the neurological disorder that occur most often and are among the most frequent symptoms seen by doctors.
- 90% of the population experience occasional headaches.
- 50% of the general population have headaches during any given year.
- 74% suffer from tension-type headaches.
- 11%-17% suffer from migraine headaches.
- 0.4% suffer from cluster headaches.
- 7.7% of children and adolescents suffer from headaches.

DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT

The most important step in treating headaches is to know what kind of headache one has.

This article will look at the kinds of headaches that occur most often and will describe them further. The best advice for any headache sufferer is to see a doctor for a proper diagnosis.

TENSION HEADACHES

- Tension headaches are the most common type of headache
- Sufferers describe the pain as a band around the head; a constant ache or pressure around the head, especially at the temples or back of the head and neck
- This type of headache is not as severe as migraines, so they are very seldom accompanied by nausea and vomiting
- These headaches rarely stop the sufferer from continuing their regular activities
- A gentle head massage or over-the-counter treatments, such as aspirin, ibuprofen, or paracetamol, are usually sufficient to treat tension headaches
- Experts believe the headaches may be caused by contraction of neck and scalp muscles (in response to stress) or possibly due to changes in brain chemicals.

MIGRAINES

- Migraines can cause a severe throbbing pain or a pulsing sensation, usually on just one side of the head which can last for hours and sometimes days.
 - The pain is often accompanied by nausea, vomiting and an extreme sensitivity to light and sound.
 - Some days before the migraine, some people experience subtle changes, called prodrome symptoms.
 - These symptoms can include constipation, mood changes (low mood or extreme happiness), food cravings, neck stiffness, increased thirst and urination and frequent yawning.
- Just before or during a migraine, some warning symptoms may occur (referred to as an aura) including flashes of light, blind spots, tingling on one side of the face, arm or leg and difficulty in speaking.
- If medication is taken immediately when the warning symptoms appear, it may prevent a migraine attack or lessen the duration of the headache.
- After the migraine, the person might feel drained and washed-out (the post-drome phase).
- It may last for about 24 hours during which time the person may feel confused, moody, dizzy, weak and sensitive to light and sound.
- There are several prescription medications available to treat migraines.
- The best thing to do is to try and identify the triggers that might cause the migraine and to see a doctor that can help to manage the pain when it happens.



CLUSTER HEADACHES

- Cluster headaches are rated among the worst headaches
- Female sufferers reported that the pain is worse than that of child birth
- Cluster headaches tends to occur in bouts or clusters at a specific time over a 24 hour period for about 6 to 12 weeks, then disappears for about a year, only to come back with a vengeance
- It typically presents as a severe pain on the one side of the face in or around the eye or the temple and lasts anything between 15-180 minutes.

CLUSTER HEADACHES - SYMPTOMS AND RISK FACTORS

- Symptoms include the following:
 - Excruciating pain, generally situated in or around one eye; always one-sided
 - Sufferers tend to pace up and down or rocking backwards while sitting
 - The eye may be red (in and around the eye) with excessive tears and swelling and a drooping eyelid
 - Stuffy or runny nose just on the affected side of the face
- Risk factors to develop cluster headaches are:
 - Men are more likely to have cluster headaches
 - Many people who get cluster headache attacks are smokers; quitting smoking usually has no effect on the headaches
 - Alcohol can trigger an attack and will worsen the headache if you have a drink while having the headache
 - If you have a parent or sibling who suffers from cluster headaches, it might increase your risk.

CLUSTER HEADACHES- TREATMENT

- There is no cure for cluster headaches
- Medication and treatment aim to decrease the severity of pain, shorten the headache period and prevent the attacks

Oxygen inhalation

It has been found that inhaling oxygen through a mask provides beneficial effects. Some cluster headache sufferers benefit from having mobile oxygen units at their homes. The effects of this safe, inexpensive procedure can be felt within 15 minutes.

- Doctors may use medication called triptans to relieve the pain.
- The injectable form of sumatriptan is an effective treatment for acute cluster headache. Zolmitriptan can be taken as a nasal spray or a tablet for relief from of cluster headache.

TREATMENT- LIFESTYLE AND HOME REMEDIES

- Stick to a regular sleep schedule
 - Cluster periods can begin when there are changes in the normal sleep schedule
 - During a cluster period, follow the usual sleep routine.
- Avoid alcohol
 - Alcohol, including beer and wine, can quickly trigger or worsen an attack.
- Alternative medicine
 - Taking melatonin has been shown to lessen night-time attacks. There is also some evidence that capsaicin, used inside the nose (intranasally), might reduce the frequency and severity of cluster headache attacks.
- Coping and support
 - Living with cluster headaches can be frightening and difficult. The attacks can seem unbearable and make one feel anxious and depressed. Ultimately, they can affect relationships, work and quality of life. Talking to a counsellor or therapist might help to cope with the effects of cluster headaches. Joining a headache support group can connect one with others with similar experiences and provide information.

WHEN TO SEEK EMERGENCY TREATMENT

Some severe headaches may indicate a more serious medical problem. If any of the following symptoms are experienced, please seek medical attention:

- An abrupt, severe headache
- Headache with fever, stiff neck, mental confusion, seizures, double vision, weakness, numbness or trouble speaking
- Headache after a head injury, especially if the headache gets worse
- A chronic headache that is worse after coughing, exertion, straining or a sudden movement
- If you are older than 50 years and start to experience headaches for the first time

CONCLUSION

Headaches happen often and happen to most people. However, knowing what triggers it, how to avoid it and when to seek medical intervention, can go a long way to bring quick relief and to make the pain more bearable.

Next time somebody complains about having a headache, show some support and understanding...headaches can be very painful!

DISCLAIMER

TAKE NOTE

The information provided in this article is for education purposes only and does not serve as a medical diagnosis. Members should always consult their healthcare provider with serious symptoms.

Please note that Heritage Health plans do not necessarily cover the costs of the condition/s described.

