

[IMAGE]

## Headache Hassles

### And How to Deal With Them

By Dr. Kevin Wong

Do you or someone you love struggle with frequent headaches? You can probably hold up both hands and still not have enough fingers to count everyone you know who suffers from headaches at one time or another. We all seem to have that friend or co-worker who struggles with migraines. Of course, it could even be you!

Headache disorders are among the top 10 most disabling health conditions. They are extremely common, to say the least, and interestingly enough, women are affected by headaches more frequently than men. Globally, the percentages of the adult population with an active headache disorder are staggering: 46 percent for headache in general, 11 percent for migraine, 42 percent for tension-type headache and 1-3 percent for cluster headache.

*Headache* is defined as pain in the head or upper neck. It is one of the most common locations of pain in the body and has many causes. Typical types of headaches include migraine, tension and cluster headaches. There are also a variety of less common types of headaches. Headaches are quite a pervasive problem in modern society. Once the type is identified, there are a variety of treatment avenues one can go down. In the end, taking a natural approach can be extremely effective and may help you to relieve your pain without resorting to the all-too-common treatment option: over-the-counter pain medication.

#### Headache - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Which Type(s) of Headache Do You Get?**

*Tension headaches* are the most common type of headache, and yet their causes aren't well-understood. A tension headache is generally a diffuse, mild to moderate pain that many people describe as feeling as if there's a tight band around their head. As many as 90 percent of adults will suffer one or more tension headaches. Tension headaches are more common among women than men.

*Migraine headaches* are the second most common type of headache. An estimated 28 million people in the United States (about 12 percent of the population) will experience migraine headaches at some point in their

life. Migraine headaches affect children as well as adults. Before puberty, boys and girls are affected equally by migraine headaches, but after puberty, more females than males are affected. An estimated 6 percent of men and up to 18 percent of women will experience a migraine headache during their lifetime.

*Cluster headaches* are so named because the attacks come in groups. The pain arrives with little, if any, warning, and has been described as the most severe and intense of any headache type. It generally lasts from 30-45 minutes, although it might persist for several hours before disappearing. Unfortunately, the pain can recur later in the day. Most sufferers experience one to four headaches a day during a cluster period.

Cluster headaches frequently surface during the morning or late at night; the cluster cycle can last weeks or months and then can disappear for months or years. It is estimated that less than 1 percent of the population are victims of cluster headaches. More men (about five to one) than women suffer from cluster headaches.

There is no doubt that headaches of all types affect quality of life. Some people have occasional headaches that resolve quickly, while others are debilitated. Tension, migraine, and cluster headaches are not life-threatening. However, due to the quality and intensity of the pain, people often have trouble concentrating, and their work and home life suffer. In many cases, you hear of people having to go to sleep in order to make the headache disappear, which can be difficult to do when you're in pain.

### **What You Can Do to Get Rid of Headaches**

Most people with headaches treat themselves with over-the-counter (OTC) pain medications such as aspirin, ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil), acetaminophen (Tylenol) and naproxen (Aleve). If these fail to provide more than short-term relief (which they often do), other supportive treatments are available. It is important to remember that OTC medications may have side effects and potential interactions with prescription medications. This can lead to a whole host of problems and emphasizes the value of alternatives to drugs. Here are some of the most important (and effective) nonpharmaceutical options for dealing with headaches:

Headache with ice pack - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Chiropractic**: I have never seen a headache patient who did not have some type of misalignment of the bones of the neck (cervical spine). It is amazing how much muscle spasm and tension can be caused by misaligned bones. When bones are even slightly out of alignment, the muscles attached to them become stressed, so they become tight. Tight muscles restrict the flow of information through the nerves and circulation through the blood vessels. This can contribute to all sorts of problems, including headaches and neck pain.

Having your chiropractor adjust those spinal bones back into their normal alignment will reset your system. The joints will have better movement, the muscles can begin to relax on their own and the circulation and nervous systems can start to flow again. The spine and the bones of the extremities really do hold the key to feeling good for the long term.

**Massage Therapy:** A good therapeutic massage by a certified massage therapist can relax muscle tissue, improve circulation, and clear out the toxins that are trying to drain (lymphatic system). It is astonishing how much muscle tension accompanies any type of headache in the body. The muscles of the neck and upper back are among the most powerful in the body. After all, they have to hold up the head, which can weigh as much as a bowling ball.

massage for headache - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark When chiropractic and massage work together, patients will respond especially well to care. I suggest to my patients that they should have their massage and chiropractic treatments within 36 hours of each other. This way, the adjustments and the muscle relaxation can work together.

**Acupuncture:** Acupuncture and Oriental medicine, including natural herbs, are other powerful methods to help manage headaches. Acupuncture works with the body's natural energy or *chi* as it flows through all of the organs and parts of the body. When energy becomes trapped or blocked, it can contribute to a whole host of painful conditions or situations in the body, including headaches. An acupuncturist can expertly insert thin needles into specific spots of your body to release the trapped energy, allow it to flow better and contribute further to relaxing muscle, which will improve circulation and nervous system flow.

**Ergonomics:** Daily habits and body positions are extremely important when it comes to preventing headaches. For example, I have found that for many people, headaches start with something as simple as their pillow. In general, sleeping on your back is best with a pillow under your neck and head. If you are going to sleep on your side, the pillow needs to be wide enough to span the distance between your shoulders and neck. Custom-made pillows are now available to help give you the proper support you need. Ask your chiropractor for guidance in this area to help ensure you get the pillow that's best for you.

Your computer desk or workstation and telephone setup also need to be examined. Improper keyboard and monitor placement can cause eye strain and make you crane your neck for hours on end. A chair that is not adjusted properly or fit to your body type can stress the entire body, including the neck. All of these factors can contribute to headaches.

**Exercise:** Performed correctly, specific exercises can help strengthen upper back and neck muscles and improve posture, which will reduce the risk of muscle tension and poor-posture-related dysfunction that can contribute to headaches. Exercise also reduces emotional stress, which often goes hand in hand with a headache. Remember, make sure that the exercises you are performing do not strain any of your neck and upper back muscles. I often recommend my patients who are starting a fitness routine for the first time to consult with a personal trainer or physical therapist for at least 3-5 sessions to learn the proper techniques for exercises. For those of you already exercising, consult with your doctor about the exercises you are doing to make sure they are not stressing your body too much and creating further problems.

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### **Headaches: Many Types, Many Potential Causes**

<u>Type of Headache</u>	<u>General Symptoms</u>	<u>Potential Cause(s)</u>
<b>Common Migraine</b>	Severe throbbing pain, nausea or vomiting, dizziness, sensitivity to light/sound	Excessive dilation or contraction of blood vessels in the brain
<b>Classic Migraine</b>	Same as above, but preceded by visual disturbances, numbness in hands/legs, hallucinations and/or smelling strange odors.	Excessive dilation or contraction of blood vessels in the brain
<b>Cluster Headache</b>	Severe, throbbing pain (one side of the head only); flushing of the face, tearing of eyes, nasal congestion	Stress, alcohol use, smoking
<b>Tension Headache</b>	Constant pain in one area or all over the head; sore muscles and pain in neck and upper back; light-headedness and dizziness	Stress/anxiety, depression, anger, food allergies, poor posture
<b>Bilious Headache</b>	Dull pain in forehead; throbbing temples	Indigestion, overeating, lack of exercise
<b>Caffeine Headache</b>	Throbbing pain	Caffeine withdrawal, causing blood vessels to dilate
<b>Exertion Headache</b>	Generalized headache during or after physical exertion (exercise, etc.) or passive exertion (sneezing, coughing, etc.)	Usually related to migraine or cluster headache; rarely related to organic disease.
<b>Eyestrain Headache</b>	Bilateral frontal pain (usually)	Eye muscle imbalance, uncorrected vision, astigmatism

<b>Fever Headache</b>	Generalized headache	Inflammation of blood vessels caused by fever/infection
<b>Hunger Headache</b>	Headache that strikes just before mealtime or after prolonged fasting	Low blood sugar and muscle tension caused by skipping meals, stringent dieting
<b>Sinus Headache</b>	Nagging pain over the nasal/sinus area; may increase in intensity as day progresses	Allergies or infection leading to blocked sinus ducts or acute sinus problems
<b>TMJ Headache</b>	Pain above the ear, on the sides of the jaw or in the face; clicking or popping of jaw; muscle contractions on one side of the face	Stress, poor bite, jaw clenching, teeth grinding, gum chewing

*Source:* Balch JF, Balch PA. *Prescription for Nutritional Healing, 2nd Edition*. Avery Publishing Group: N.Y.

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