



Leaflet: Headaches - tension type

Tension Headache

Tension headache is the commonest type of headache. Most people have them occasionally. To have 1 or 2 per month is common. Some people have them more frequently. Sometimes they develop more often than usual during times of stress.

What causes tension headaches?

The exact cause is not clear. Emotional tension or stress may play a part. Physical tension in the muscles of the scalp and neck may also lead to headaches. For example, poor posture at a desk may cause the neck and scalp muscles to tense. Squinting to read if sight is poor may tense the scalp muscles too. Some people feel that some things trigger a headache. For example some foods, bright sunlight, illness, depression, anxiety, cold, heat, tiredness, noise, alcohol, caffeine, etc. However, many headaches develop for no apparent reason.

Medication is a special cause of frequent headaches..

- ◆ Overuse of painkillers for headaches may *cause* headaches. A vicious circle may develop. Regular painkillers may be taken for a bad spell of headaches. This may gradually lead to daily use of painkillers. The body then becomes used to painkillers. A 'rebound' headache then develops if painkillers are *not* taken each day. About 3 in 100 people have headaches on most days. Daily use of painkillers *for* headache is a common cause of this.
- ◆ Headaches are sometimes a side effect of medication used to treat other conditions.

What are the symptoms of tension headaches?

A tension headache is often described as a tightness around the 'hat-band' area. Some people feel a 'squeezing' or 'pressure' on their head. It is normally on both sides of the head and often spreads down the neck. Sometimes it is just on one side. Occasionally there are tender spots on the scalp or pain around the jaw. They can last from 30 minutes to 7 days. Mostly they last a few hours or so. In most people the severity is described as moderate or mild but sometimes they can be severe. Compared to migraine, a tension headache is usually less severe and is constant rather than throbbing. There are usually no other symptoms and the person is well between headaches. A doctor can be confident that headaches are the tension type by their description, by the absence of other symptoms and a physical examination is normal.

There may be another cause of the headache if other symptoms occur. For example, migraine is likely if the headaches are usually on one side of the head and vomiting occurs. Pain and tenderness over the sinuses may indicate a sinus infection. Tooth pain can sometimes spread to the head. Headaches due to conditions of the brain such as meningitis or tumours are rare. The character of these headaches is usually different and they typically cause other symptoms.

Different types of headaches may occur in the same person. Some people have tension and migraine headaches at different times. It is best to discuss with a doctor if headaches develop which are different to the ones that have occurred in the past.

What are the treatments for tension headache?

Relaxation - different people find different things helpful. For example, a walk, some exercise or simply taking a break from the normal routine may help. A massage of the shoulder and neck muscles is often helpful. A hot flannel applied to the neck or a warm bath may help.

Painkillers - such as paracetamol or aspirin are commonly taken and are usually effective. It may be best to take painkillers as soon as a headache starts to develop. This may 'ward off' the headache more effectively than treating it after it has fully developed. A second dose of aspirin or paracetamol can be taken after 4 hours if necessary. (Combination tablets with small amounts of codeine such as co-codamol are best avoided for headaches. They are more likely to cause 'rebound' or medication headaches as described above).

Anti-inflammatory painkillers are alternatives. Ibuprofen is an example. This can be bought at pharmacies but others need a prescription. Anti-inflammatories may be slightly more effective than paracetamol or aspirin. However, side effects such as an upset stomach are sometimes a problem. Always read the instruction leaflet that comes with anti-inflammatories. They may not be advised for people with some other conditions such as duodenal ulcers or asthma.

Painkillers for headache should not be taken for more than a few days at a time. They should not be taken on more than 15 days in any month. More than this may lead to medication headache described above. Do not be tempted to take painkillers all the time to prevent headaches. Take each day as it comes. Consult a doctor if painkillers are needed every day for headaches.

Preventing tension headaches

Diary - it may be useful to keep a headache diary if headaches are frequent. Note down when, where, how bad and how long headaches occur. Also take a note of anything that may have caused it. A pattern may emerge and a trigger factor may be identified. For example, if they seem to occur when in bright sunshine, when tired or hungry. Situations that cause eye strain, poor neck posture, stress, anxiety, anger or other emotions may be identified as causing headaches. It may be possible to avoid or change situations that trigger headaches.

Stress - is a common trigger for headaches. It is also common to be stressed without realising it. Avoid stressful situations whenever possible. Sometimes a stressful job or situation cannot be avoided. Learning to cope with stress and to relax with relaxation exercises may help. Such techniques as breathing exercises or coping strategies may ease anxiety in stressful situations and prevent a possible headache. Books (and tapes) on how to relax are available. Sometimes a referral to a counsellor or psychologist may be advised.

Regular exercise - has been found by some people to relieve stress and tension. This may have a knock-on effect of reducing frequent headaches. Fairly strenuous exercise for 30 minutes at least 3 times a week is best. However, any increase in exercise may be beneficial.

Depression - may lead to frequent headaches and, if suspected, mention this to a doctor.

A preventative medicine - may be advised. These are different to painkillers and have to be taken each day. They include some types of antidepressants and beta blockers. They work best for migraine but may also help some people with frequent tension headaches.

[Return to top](#)