Relief for Common Headaches

- Over-the-counter pain relievers as soon as the pain begins
- Heat — a warm pad to the back of the head, a warm bath or shower — to relieve tension headaches
- Peace, quiet, and mental and physical relaxation
- Massage therapy to reduce muscle strain and create a relaxed feeling … or physical therapy, which uses heat, ice, ultrasound and other measures to relieve muscle tightness and pain

Is the REST of Your Body Causing Your Headache?

The posture connection. Because muscular contraction is a major cause of headaches, always maintain good posture.

Be comfortable. Stand or sit up straight … relax your shoulders … organize your work space to minimize overreaching … adjust your seat properly and keep your knees higher than your hips.

Rest your eyes. Take occasional breaks to prevent eyestrain. Try looking out a window or focusing on a distant object at least once an hour.

Reduce glare. Adjust lighting so it doesn't shine directly on your computer screen. Use a glare-reducing screen protector.

More Prevention Tips

1. Get your blood pressure checked. **Why:** High blood pressure is the most common disease that causes persistent headaches.
2. Consider having an eye exam. A vision problem may be a factor.
3. Remember that sinus headaches are actually not very common. **One sign:** The headache gets worse if you bend over.
4. Take control of any allergies you may have. They may be the cause of your headaches.

The Caffeine Connection

How it hurts: When overused, caffeine can cause withdrawal headaches if you cut back abruptly.
Self-defense: Drink no more than 200 mg of caffeine or two caffeinated beverages per day. Cut down gradually.

HEADACHES

Your Guide to Prevention and Relief

HEADACHE BASICS

Whether you get a headache occasionally or every day, there is something you should know. You can learn how to manage the pain and often even prevent headaches from recurring. Determining what kind of headache you're having is a good first step.

The Headache Types

- **Tension headaches** account for 90 percent of everyday headaches. They're usually caused by excessive muscle tension in the scalp and neck, often resulting from stress.
- **Vascular headaches** are linked to changes in blood flow to the brain. There are two main varieties:

  Migraines feature often intense, throbbing pain on one side of the head and may be preceded by flashing lights or light-headedness. Migraines may be accompanied by nausea, vomiting, dizziness, and sensitivity to light and noise.

  Cluster headaches occur once or more per day for several weeks or months, then disappear for months or even years. ***Symptoms:*** extreme pain centered on or near one eye, which may become red and teary; the nostril on the affected side may become congested.
- **Organic headaches**, which are rare, are usually the result of an underlying condition. ***Examples:*** tumor, infection or other disease, such as of the brain, eye, nose or sinuses.

Always call your doctor if you are concerned or have any questions about your headaches.

When to Seek Help

You may have a more serious condition if your headache is accompanied by fever or nausea, involves pain in the eye, sinus or ear, occurs after a blow to the head, persists for more than 2-3 days, keeps recurring or interferes with normal life.

Preventing the Pain

Get enough sleep. Go to bed and get up at the same times each day to avoid headaches caused by too little or too much sleep.

Don't skip meals. Going hungry allows blood sugar levels to drop — a common headache trigger.

Control stress. Stress is a frequent trigger of tension headaches and migraines.

Avoid the three Cs. Cheese (the ripened varieties such as Brie and cheddar), chocolate and citrus fruits contain amines, substances that in some people can cause blood vessels to swell.

Watch what's around you. Many environmental factors can contribute to headaches. **Examples:** smoky rooms, perfume, paint, glue, varnish, excessive noise and glaring lights.

This information is not intended as a substitute for professional care. Medical Editor: Zorba Paster, M.D.
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