Headaches

A headache is pain within any region of the head. Headaches may occur on one or both sides of the head, be isolated to a certain location, radiate across the head from one point or have a vise-like quality. A headache may be a sharp pain, throbbing sensation or dull ache. Headaches may appear gradually or suddenly, and they may last less than an hour or for several days.

Headache basics

**Tension Headaches:** The most common type of headache is a “tension headache.” Tension headaches generally develop gradually, and often involve the entire head as well as the neck and shoulders. Muscle relaxation techniques can be very useful in treatment. Most people occasionally get tension headaches and they can usually be treated simply.

**Migraine headaches:** With a classic migraine, the headache is preceded by a feeling that a headache will develop (prodrome) followed by visual phenomena such as dark or bright spots, streaks of light, or tunnel vision (aura). The headache then develops, usually on one side. It is throbbing in nature often accompanied by nausea and increased sensitivity to light and noise.

Most people with migraine headaches do not experience prodrome or aura. A common migraine headache like a classic migraine headache is treatable and often preventable.

*Migraineurs*, those who develop migraine headaches, often have a family history of migraine headache and they have headache triggers suggesting that genetic factors contribute to a person’s susceptibility to migraines.

**Cluster headaches:** These are headaches that may last from minutes to hours and may occur day after day at a similar time over a period of weeks. They are sharp and typically have a sudden onset. Cluster headaches are often described as sharp one-sided pain that usually begins around the eyes or temple area.

**Sinus headaches:** These headaches are those frontal headaches that some people experience with sinus infection and with changes in the weather. Allergies can also provoke them.

Treatment

To avoid headaches, employ good health habits that include: adequate sleep, healthy diet, regular exercise and good stress management. Quitting smoking is essential in reducing the risks for all headaches.

Relaxation and related stress reduction therapies can diminish the frequency and intensity of headaches. Alternative therapies used for headache management include hypnosis,
biofeedback, meditation, visualization and guided imagery, acupuncture, acupressure, yoga and other physical relaxation exercises.

Any over-the-counter pain medications like aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen sodium or acetaminophen can be very useful. No one medication has ever been proven to be more effective than the other, though there is great variability in effectiveness from person to person.

People with daily or frequent headaches should know that there are often very effective methods of headache prevention. Primary prevention is always valuable. Migraineurs can try to avoid triggers. For anyone with frequent headaches, stress management and improvement of overall fitness through diet and exercise are important. Tobacco cessation can be extremely effective in decreasing headache frequency, even though headaches may at first intensify.

Some primary headaches can be triggered by lifestyle factors, including:

- Alcohol, particularly red wine
- Certain foods, such as processed meats that contain nitrates
- Changes in sleep or lack of sleep
- Poor posture
- Skipped meals
- Stress
- Changes in weather

Web links for more information:

- National Headache Foundation: http://www.headaches.org/
- Mayo Clinic: http://www.mayoclinic.org/neurology/headachegroup.html
- National Institutes of Health:

If you are a registered Millersville University student and you have questions or you need to make an appointment, please call Millersville University Health Services at 872-3250.

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