

HEADACHES

Headaches affect just about everyone at some point and they can present themselves in many different ways. Some people only experience pain in one part of their head or behind their eyes, some people experience a pounding sensation inside their whole head, and some people even experience nausea, while others do not. The pain itself may be dull or sharp and may last for anywhere from a few minutes to a few days. Fortunately, very few headaches have serious underlying causes, but those that do require urgent medical attention.

Although headaches can be due to a wide variety of causes, such as drug reactions, temporomandibular joint dysfunction (TMJ), tightness in the neck muscles, low blood sugar, high blood pressure, stress and fatigue, the majority of recurrent headaches are of two types: tension headaches (also called cervicogenic headaches) and migraine headaches. There is a third, less common, type of headaches called a cluster headache that is a cousin to the migraine.

Chiropractic Care for Headaches

Numerous research studies have shown that chiropractic adjustments are very effective for treating tension headaches, especially headaches that originate in the neck.

A report released in 2001 by researchers at the Duke University Evidence-Based Practice Center in Durham, NC, found that "spinal manipulation resulted in almost immediate improvement for those headaches that originate in the neck, and had significantly fewer side effects and longer-lasting relief of tension-type headache than commonly prescribed medications." These findings support an earlier study published in the *Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics* that found spinal manipulative therapy to be very effective for treating tension headaches. This study also found that those who stopped chiropractic treatment after four weeks continued to experience a sustained benefit in contrast to those patients who received pain medication.

Each individual's case is different and requires a thorough evaluation before a proper course of chiropractic care can be determined. However, in most cases of tension headaches, significant improvement is accomplished through manipulation of the upper two cervical vertebrae, coupled with adjustments to the junction between the cervical and thoracic spine. This is also helpful in most cases of migraine headaches, as long as food and lifestyle triggers are avoided as well.

Headache Trigger Points

Trigger point therapy for headaches tends to involve four muscles: the Splenius muscles, the Suboccipitals, the Sternocleidomastoid (SCM) and the Trapezius. The Splenius muscles are comprised of two individual muscles - the Splenius Capitis and the Splenius Cervicis. Both of these muscles run from the upper back to either the base of the skull (splenius capitis) or the upper cervical vertebrae (splenius cervicis). Trigger points in the Splenius muscles are a common cause of headache pain that travels through the head to the back of the eye, as well as to the top of the head.

The Suboccipitals are actually a group of four small muscles that are responsible for maintaining the proper movement and positioning between the first cervical vertebra and the base of the skull. Trigger points in these muscles will cause pain that feels like it's inside the head, extending from the back of the head to the eye and forehead. Often times it will feel like the whole side of the head hurts, a pain pattern similar to that experienced with a migraine.

The Sternocleidomastoid (SCM) muscle runs from the base of the skull, just behind the ear, down the side of the neck to attach to the top of the sternum (breastbone). Although most people are not aware of the SCM trigger points, their effects are widespread, including referred pain, balance problems and visual disturbances. Referred pain patterns tend to be deep eye pain, headaches over the eye and can even cause earaches. Another unusual characteristic of SCM trigger points is that they can cause dizziness, nausea and unbalance.

The trapezius muscle is the very large, flat muscle in the upper and mid back. A common trigger point located in the very top of the Trapezius muscle refers pain to the temple and back of the head and is sometimes responsible for headache pain. This trigger point is capable of producing satellite trigger points in the muscles in the temple or jaw, which can lead to jaw or tooth pain.

Avoid Headache Triggers

- Stress may be a trigger, but certain foods, odors, menstrual periods, and changes in weather are among many factors that may also trigger headache.
- Emotional factors such as depression, anxiety, frustration, letdown, and even pleasant excitement may be associated with developing a headache.
- Keeping a headache diary will help you determine whether factors such as food, change in weather, and/or mood have any relationship to your headache pattern.
- Repeated exposure to nitrite compounds can result in a dull, pounding headache that may be accompanied by a flushed face. Nitrite, which dilates blood vessels, is found in such products as heart medicine and dynamite, but is also used as a chemical to preserve meat. Hot dogs and other processed meats containing sodium nitrite can cause headaches.
- Eating foods prepared with monosodium glutamate (MSG) can result in headache. Soy sauce, meat tenderizer, and a variety of packaged foods contain this chemical which is touted as a flavor enhancer.
- Headache can also result from exposure to poisons, even common household varieties like insecticides, carbon tetrachloride, and lead. Children who ingest flakes of lead paint may develop headaches. So may anyone who has contact with lead batteries or lead-glazed pottery.
- Foods that are high in the amino acid tyramine should also be avoided, such as ripened cheeses (cheddar, brie), chocolate, as well as any food pickled or fermented foods.

Migraine Headaches

About 36 million Americans suffer from the debilitating headaches known as migraines, according to the Migraine Research Foundation. Women between the ages of 25 and 55 are

the likeliest victims. Migraine headaches can last anywhere from a few hours to three days, drastically compromising individuals' work, social and family lives and often landing them in emergency rooms. Other issues may accompany the migraine, such as nausea, visual disturbances, dizziness, tingling and sensitivity to light, sound, smell and touch.

Symptoms

Migraines often start on one side of the head, but may spread to both sides. Typically, the worst pain is around the sides of the forehead. Many sufferers experience what's called an aura. This visual disturbance may manifest itself as a temporary blind spot, blurred vision, zigzag lines or flashing lights. When a migraine occurs, sufferers likely feel irritable, depressed and simply want to lie down in a dark and quiet room.

Causes

Why do some people get migraines and others don't? Researchers aren't sure. Genetics seem to play a part. When the migraine starts, blood vessels constrict, which can cause the changes in vision. Then the vessels dilate, flooding the brain with blood and ramping up the headache.

Triggers vary between individuals. Alcohol and certain foods, such as chocolate, aged cheeses or meals containing nitrates or MSG, launch many a headache. For other people, crying, stress, odors, hormonal fluctuation or loud noises can trigger migraines.

Treatment

Unfortunately, researchers haven't yet figured out how to cure migraines. Treatment focuses on two fronts: preventing migraines and decreasing pain once a headache is underway.

If you suffer from migraines, keep a headache journal. Recording the events in the 24 hours preceding your migraine can help you identify triggers. If your headaches coincide with eating certain foods, prevention may require a change in diet. If stress triggers migraines, learning relaxation techniques could be helpful.

Many doctors prescribe medications for preventing migraines, including beta blockers, calcium channel blockers, antidepressants, anticonvulsants and even Botox. Sufferers can also take drugs that constrict blood vessels in the brain as soon as they feel a headache coming on. These approaches work for some people, but most medications have side effects.

Alternative therapies for preventing migraine headaches include massage, herbs, nutritional supplements and acupuncture. Sufferers and researchers have experimented with many vitamins, herbs and minerals. According to the Mayo Clinic, some evidence suggests that the herbs butterbur and feverfew may prevent migraine headaches, or at least decrease their severity. Coenzyme Q10 and high doses of vitamin B2 might also help prevent or reduce the frequency of migraines. Don't experiment with these supplements if you're pregnant.

Chiropractic Care and Migraines

Some migraine sufferers turn to chiropractors for relief from their headaches. Spinal manipulations lessened the severity and frequency of attacks in some clinical trial participants, according to the University of Maryland Medical Center.

If you suffer from migraines, call our clinic. A spinal adjustment could help your condition without the side effects of medications.

Tension Headaches

Tension headaches are the most common type of headache. The pain usually spreads throughout the head so that sufferers feel like they're wearing a tight band.

Doctors divide tension headaches into two types — episodic and chronic. The episodic variety lasts from half an hour to a week, and recurs for up to two weeks each month. Chronic tension headaches may be continuous and last for hours. If you have the band-around-your-head feeling for more than 15 days a month, for at least three months in a row, you may suffer from chronic tension headaches.

Tension headaches usually correlate with depression, anxiety and emotional suffering. Alternatively, the cause could be physical, such as muscle strain due to a neck injury or abnormality in the cervical vertebrae. Some children develop tension headaches due to eye strain.

Symptoms

Tension headache symptoms include:

- Persistent dull ache in the head
- Tender shoulder and neck muscles
- Sensitive scalp
- Tightness around forehead, sides and back of head
- Worsening as the day goes on

Treatment

Treatment focuses on preventing tension headaches and on decreasing pain once they strike. You can take prescription-strength or over-the-counter (OTC) pain relievers. For non-drug pain relief, try altering temperature. A heating pad or an ice pack might help. You can also try acupuncture or massage.

Some doctors prescribe preventive medicines, including antidepressants, muscle relaxants and anticonvulsants. These help some sufferers, but have side effects.

Given that tension headaches often go hand in hand with anxiety and stress, some sufferers try calming activities, such as yoga, meditation or spending time in nature. Regular aerobic exercise can ease depression and possibly decrease headache pain.

Chiropractic Care and Tension Headaches

Improving your posture might keep your neck muscles more relaxed. A chiropractor can assess your spinal alignment and make manual adjustments as needed. Because many tension headaches start in the neck, your chiropractic doctor might focus on adjusting your cervical vertebrae. He or she might also advise you on ergonomics, relaxation techniques and helpful exercises.

Chiropractic care offers pain relief without the side effects of medications. If you suffer from tension headaches, call our clinic today so we can help alleviate your symptoms.