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Headache Management in Adults

Are there different types of headaches?

Yes. There are different types of headache. The 2 most common types are:

- Tension headaches: Tension headaches cause pressure or tightness on both sides of the head and sometimes radiate into the neck muscles.
- Migraine headaches: Migraine headaches often start off mild and then get worse. They often affect just 1 side of the head. The pain often feels like it is pounding or throbbing. Routine activities like walking or climbing stairs can make the headache worse. Migraines can also cause nausea or vomiting, or make you sensitive to light and sound.

Is there anything I can do to feel better when I have a headache?

Yes. Some people feel better if they:

- Take non-prescription pain medicines (but check with your doctor first if you have a health condition or already take prescription medicines)
- Lie down in a cool, dark, quiet room (this works best for migraine headaches)

Should I see my doctor?

See your doctor right away if:

- Your headache comes on suddenly, quickly becomes severe, or could be described as "the worst headache of your life"
- You have a fever or stiff neck with your headache
- You also have a seizure, personality changes or confusion, or you pass out
- Your headache began right after you exercised or had a minor injury
- You have new headaches, especially if you are pregnant or older than 40
- You have weakness, numbness, or trouble seeing (migraine headaches can sometimes cause these symptoms, but you should be seen right away the first time these symptoms happen)

You should also see a doctor if you get headaches often or if your headaches are severe.

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Is there anything I can do to keep from getting headaches?

Yes. Some people find that their headaches are triggered by certain foods or things they do. To keep from getting headaches in the future, you can keep a "headache calendar." In the calendar, write down every time you have a headache and what you ate and did before it started. That way you can find out if there is anything you should avoid eating or doing. You can also write down what medicine you took for the headache and whether or not it helped.

Some common headache triggers include:

- Stress
- Skipping meals or eating too little
- Having too little or too much caffeine
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Drinking alcohol
- Certain drinks or foods

If your headaches are frequent, severe, or long-lasting, your doctor can suggest ways to try to prevent them. For example, it might help to learn relaxation techniques and ways to manage stress. In some cases, medicines can also help.

How are headaches treated?

There are lots of medicines that can ease the pain of headaches. You can try taking acetaminophen (Tylenol®), ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®), or naproxen (Aleve®). There are prescription medicines that can help, too. The right medicine for you will depend on what type of headaches you get, how often you get them, and how bad they are.

If you get headaches often, work with your doctor to find a treatment that helps. Do not try to manage frequent headaches on your own with non-prescription pain medicines. Taking non-prescription pain medicines too often can actually cause more headaches later.

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Are there other complementary treatments for headaches?

Several therapies can be used along with medical treatment in people with headache.

Lifestyle changes: Some simple lifestyle adjustments can help to reduce the frequency of headaches. These include:

- Stop smoking
- Reduce the amount of alcohol you drink
- Decrease or avoid caffeine
- Eat and sleep on a regular schedule
- Exercise several times per week

Physical therapy: Some people with frequent headaches benefit from working with a physical therapist who has a special interest in headaches. This treatment may be used if you do not respond or only partially or temporarily respond to medicines, or if you cannot use medicines (eg, if you are pregnant or breastfeeding).

Acupuncture: Acupuncture involves inserting hair-thin, metal needles into the skin at specific points on the body. It causes little to no pain. Electrical stimulation is sometimes applied to the acupuncture needle. Acupuncture has not been proven to improve tension-type or chronic daily headaches. However, people who do not want to try or who cannot tolerate other treatments may try using acupuncture.

Behavioral therapy: Headaches can be triggered or worsened by stress, anxiety, depression, and other psychological factors. Furthermore, living with headache pain can cause difficulties in relationships, at work or school, and with general day-to-day living. Behavioral therapy works by helping you to address the stress, anger, or frustration that can come with frequent or chronic headache pain. There are many different types of behavioral therapy:

- Psychotherapy involves meeting with a psychologist, psychiatrist, or social worker to discuss emotional responses to living with chronic pain, treatment successes or failures, and/or personal relationships.

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- Group psychotherapy allows you to compare your experiences with headaches, overcome the tendency to withdraw and become isolated in your pain, and support others' attempts with pain management.
- Relaxation techniques can relieve muscle tension, and may include meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, self-hypnosis, and biofeedback (a technique that teaches you to control certain body functions). Biofeedback may be especially helpful for people with chronic tension-type headaches.
- Group skill-building exercises help you to learn about living with pain, including ways to improve relationships and build strength, ways to avoid negative thinking, and learning to deal with pain flares.

Herbal and homeopathic remedies: A number of homeopathic remedies and herbs are promoted to relieve or prevent headaches, including migraines. However, the effect of these remedies is not clear and these remedies are not specifically recommended.