

Healthy Living

Patient Information from the American Chiropractic Association

Headache Prevention and Treatment

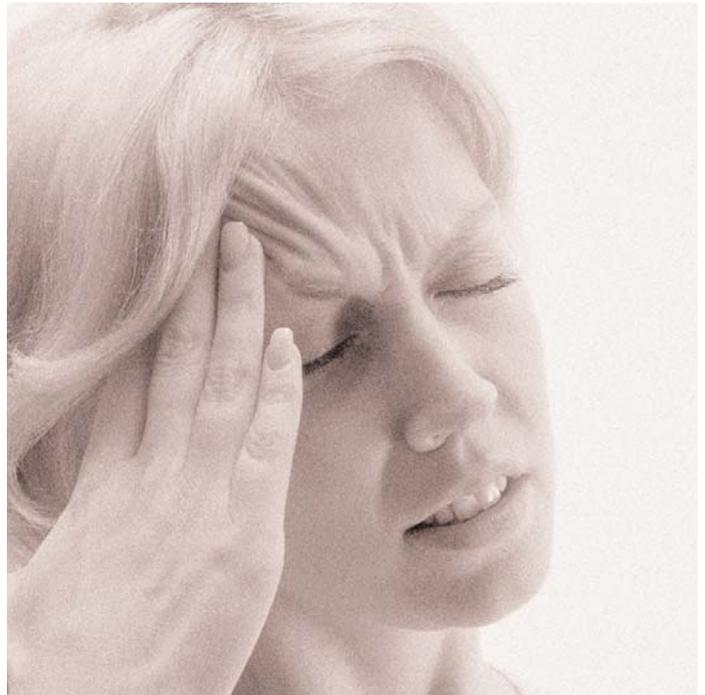
Headaches are more common in adults, although they can develop at any time in life. Approximately 4 out of 5 children have headaches at some point, but most are benign and self-resolving. In fact, many adults who suffer from headaches report having the first headache in childhood.

Headache symptoms usually begin gradually. In fact, the sudden onset of severe headache may signify a serious problem and requires immediate medical attention. Common headache is often described as achy, dull or throbbing pain. It typically begins at the base of the skull/upper part of the neck and may radiate into the eye(s), the temple, or other locations. Headaches may be felt on one or both sides of the head. Often loud noises or bright lights may make them worse. Some patients may become nauseated or experience odd smells, sounds, or sights before and during the headache attack.

How Is a Headache Evaluated?

Early diagnosis and treatment are important in identifying a serious underlying cause for your headache. In most cases, an in-depth history and physical examination can help determine if your symptoms are related to an easily treated problem, or if it is more serious. Your doctor can use other tests that reproduce the symptoms of your headache to help develop a specific management plan for your condition, or refer you to another health care provider. X-rays, laboratory tests and even advanced imaging studies like magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) may be necessary. Your doctor may ask you to complete a headache diary, recording:

- day and time of the headache
- headache location
- what the headache feels like
- what you were doing when the headache began
- how long the headache lasts
- what makes it feel better or worse
- anything else you notice before, during, or after the attacks



What Is the Treatment for Headaches?

Headache treatment is cause-related. Doctors of chiropractic often treat patients with tension-type headaches and headaches caused by problems with the joints and muscles in the neck, as well.

Joint manipulation and mobilization of the neck, along with stretching and strengthening exercises, have been demonstrated to be effective in the treatment of this type of headache.

Massage and other forms of soft-tissue treatment can sometimes be helpful.

Scientists are also investigating other therapies, such as **acupuncture**, to prevent and treat this disorder.

Over-the-counter pain relievers, such as acetaminophen, can be used for an occasional headache, but not for long-term headache management.

More serious causes of headache require aggressive treatment, and your doctor of chiropractic can assist you in finding a medical headache specialist.

The majority of patients with headache recover completely after treatment. Unfortunately, the recurrence rate is relatively high, particularly with tension-type headache. If you have any questions or concerns about headache, feel free to discuss them with your doctor or chiropractic.

What Causes Headaches?

Headaches can be primary and secondary. Primary headaches do not result from some other health condition. The most common type of primary headache is caused by problems with the neck muscles. Changes in the blood vessels inside the skull usually cause migraines. Other common types of headache include “cluster” headaches—headaches grouped together over weeks at a time; sinus headaches, associated with allergies and/or sinus infection; and headaches from poor vision.

Secondary headache results from some other cause or condition—head injury, concussion, blood vessel problems, or high blood pressure—or from side effects of some medications, infections in the head or sinuses or elsewhere in the body. Rare headache causes include tumors, aneurysms and other abnormal growths inside the skull, and toxic substances in the blood. Certain foods, such as monosodium glutamate (MSG), a food flavor enhancer, may cause headaches, as well.

How Can Headaches Be Prevented?

Muscle-tension headaches can often be avoided by maintaining proper posture and neck movements while performing your normal activities. You should:

- Avoid slouching
- Avoid reading with your neck bent forward
- Keep your computer monitor at eye level
- Take frequent breaks from reading and working on the computer.
- Try a low-fat, high-complex carbohydrate diet. A recent study demonstrated that such a diet can dramatically lower the frequency, intensity, and duration of migraine headaches. ■

What are the signs of a serious headache?

You should call your doctor and/or seek emergency care if:

- You have a stiff neck and a fever along with your headache.
- It is painful to bend your head to your chest.
- Your speech is slurred.
- You have vision changes.
- You feel numbness or weakness in your arms or legs.
- Your headache lasts longer than 3 days.
- You recently injured your head and your headache will not go away.
- You often get headaches in the morning.
- You have a sudden headache although you normally don't have them.

Other signs of serious headache include:

- The worst headache you've ever had
- Worsening or more frequent headaches
- Headache that wakes you from sleep
- Personality changes along with headache
- Early morning vomiting without headache.

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For more information on prevention and wellness, or to find a doctor of chiropractic near you, go to the Patient Information section on ACA's Web site at www.aca-today.org or call 800-986-4636.

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