

JUNE 2010 TO YOUR *HEALTH*

CATEGORIES OF HEADACHES

Stress

Stress is the most commonly recognized trigger of headaches. Stress can be physical or emotional. It can be good or bad. It is an unavoidable part of modern life.

Events causing emotional stress can trigger a migraine headache. Migraine sufferers are thought to be highly responsive emotionally, reacting quickly to stress. In times of emotional stress, certain chemicals are released that provoke the vascular changes that cause a migraine headache. The attacks become more frequent in periods of increased stress. Factors related to stress include anxiety, worry, shock, depression, excitement, and mental fatigue. Repressed emotions can also precipitate migraine headaches, and the muscle tension often brought on by stressful situations can add to the severity of the headache. After a stressful period there may be a letdown which can, in itself, trigger a migraine headache. This may be one reason for weekend headaches.

Stress is also an important factor in tension-type headache. Episodic tension-type headaches can be related to specific instances of increased worry, concern, or stress and usually are helped by eliminating the stressful situation or by over-the-counter analgesics. Chronic and repeated stress will cause daily or almost daily tension-type headache. The headache is generalized (typically in a "hat-band" distribution), and often accompanied by a sleep disturbance. Help is provided by lowering stress, psychotherapy, biofeedback, behavioral modification, and the use of antidepressant drugs under the watchful eye of a physician.

Stress cannot be completely avoided but learning to better deal with stress can help reduce headaches

Tension-Type Headache

Tension-type headache is a nonspecific headache, which is not vascular or migrainous, and is not related to organic disease. The most common form of headache, it may be related to muscle tightening in the back of the neck and/or scalp. There are two general classifications of tension-type headache: episodic and chronic, differentiated by frequency and severity of symptoms. Both are characterized as dull, aching and non-pulsating pain and affect both sides of the head.

Symptoms for both types are similar and may include:

- Muscles between head and neck contract
- A tightening band-like sensation around the neck and/or head which is a "vice-like" ache
- Pain primarily occurs in the forehead, temples or the back on head and/or neck

Episodic

Episodic tension-type headache occurs randomly and is usually triggered by temporary stress, anxiety, fatigue or anger. They are what most of us consider "stress headaches." It may disappear with the use of over-the-counter analgesics, withdrawal from the source of stress or a relatively brief period of relaxation.

For this type of headache, over-the-counter drugs of choice are aspirin, acetaminophen, and ibuprofen or naproxen sodium. Combination products with caffeine can enhance the action of the analgesics.

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Chronic

Chronic tension-type headache is a daily or continuous headache, which may have some variability in the intensity of the pain during a 24-hour cycle. It is always present. If a sufferer is taking medication daily or almost daily and is receiving little or no relief from the pain, then a physician should be seen for diagnosis and treatment.

The primary drug of choice for chronic tension-type headache is amitriptyline or some of the other antidepressants. Antidepressant drugs have analgesic actions, which can provide relief for headache sufferers. Although a patient may not be depressed, these drugs may be beneficial. Selecting an antidepressant is based on the presence of a sleep disturbance. For the patient with chronic tension-type headaches, habituating analgesics must be strictly avoided. Biofeedback techniques can also be helpful in treating tension-type headaches.

Chronic tension-type headache can also be the result of either anxiety or depression. Changes in sleep patterns or insomnia, early morning or late day occurrence of headache, feelings of guilt, weight loss, dizziness, poor concentration, ongoing fatigue and nausea commonly occur. One should seek professional diagnosis for proper treatment if these symptoms exist.

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