

Headache - A Patient's Guide

Introduction

Headache is an extremely common problem. It is estimated that 10 to 20% of all people have recurring headaches. It is one of the most common reasons people visit the doctor's office.

Headache can be the symptom of a serious problem, or it can be recurrent, annoying and disabling, but not signify any underlying structural problem.

What causes headache?

Pain in the head is carried by certain nerves that supply the head and neck. The trigeminal system serves the face. The cervical 1 and 2 nerves serve the back of the head. Although pain can indicate that something is pushing on the brain or nerves, most of the time nothing is pushing on anything.

We think that in migraine there may be a generator of headache in the brain which can be triggered by many things. Some people's generators are more sensitive to stimuli such as light, noise, odor, and stress than others, causing a person to have more frequent headache.

Types of Headaches

Most people have more than one type of headache. The most common type of headache seen in a doctor's office is migraine (the most common type of headache in the general population is tension headache). Some people do not believe that migraine and tension headaches are different headaches, but rather two ends of a headache continuum. The diagnosis of headache type is important since treatment differs for each headache type.

Migraine Without Aura

Migraine generally runs in families. This means you may have a genetic predisposition to get headaches. You can have mild pain with the features listed below, and it is still considered a migraine headache. Sometimes dizziness and blurred vision accompany migraine headache.

Migraine headaches are usually:

- Inherited
- Moderate to severe pain
- One-sided (but often two-sided)
- Associated with nausea, vomiting, and/or light and sound sensitivity
- Aggravated by movement or activity
- Pulsing or throbbing



Migraine With Aura

Sometimes people have warning signs that they are going to get a headache. This is called an aura. Auras precede the migraine headache. They are usually visual, but other symptoms can occur, such as numbness or tingling or difficulty with speech. The aura symptoms occur in 15% of patients with migraine. Typical visual auras include: zig-zag lines, spots, dots, and waves that shimmer and move. Sometimes vision can tunnel.

Other common headaches are tension headaches and cluster headaches and may be triggered by fatigue or stress.

Treatment

Most intermittent tension-type headaches are easily treated with over-the-counter medications, including: Aspirin, Paracetamol (Aeknil, others), Ibuprofen (Advil, others)

In addition, alternative therapies aimed at stress reduction may help:

- Relaxation training
- Cognitive behavioral therapy
- Massage

Migraine treatment is aimed at relieving symptoms and preventing additional attacks. If you know what triggers your migraines, avoiding those triggers will help prevent headaches. Treatment may include:

- Over-the-counter medications
- Prescription medications
- Rest in a quiet, dark room
- Hot or cold compresses to your head or neck

Reference: University of Utah Clinical Neurosciences Center Guide