

Headache and stress

A tension headache is caused by a tightening of the muscles in the upper back, neck and head, and is the most common of all the various headache types. Many people cite stress as an important headache trigger. Feelings of stress or anxiety instruct the nervous system to initiate the 'fight or flight' response, which is characterised by shallow breathing, increased blood pressure and heart rate, and increased muscle tension. Women are more prone to react in this way to anxiety and depression than men. These emotional states are among some of the known triggers for tension headaches.

Anxiety, depression and the link to headache

Studies show that people who are prone to the effects of stress as well as anxiety and depression are more likely to suffer from frequent headaches. Anxiety can make tension headaches worse by:

- Increasing muscle tension
- Flooding the body with stress chemicals, such as adrenaline
- Reducing the amount of 'relaxation' chemicals in the body, such as endorphins
- Reducing emotional tolerance to stressors and strains
- Reducing the pain threshold
- Counteracting the effects of pain-killing medication.

Women are at greater risk

Research has found that small, everyday irritations are much more likely to bring on a headache than major upheavals such as marriage, divorce or job loss. Significantly more women than men suffer from anxiety and tension headache, and women are three times more likely to experience depression. Some of the stressful life events that may result in depression in women include:

- **Financial pressure** - women typically earn less money than men, which means dealing with a lower standard of living and reduced recreational opportunities.
- **Parenthood** - women are generally the primary caregivers in the home, and parenting is a 24-hour responsibility with little respite.
- **'Role-juggling'** - trying to meet the various and often competing demands of work and family.
- **Marital and interpersonal problems.**

Short term treatment

Short term treatment options to provide pain relief include:

- Painkillers such as aspirin or paracetamol
- Microcurrent (TENS) and magnetic therapy
- Heat treatment, such as a long soak in a hot bath
- Ice packs to the face
- A scalp, neck and shoulder massage
- Stress-relieving activities, such as relaxation, meditation or hypnosis
- Exercise
- Entertaining distractions, such as a good book or movie.

Long term treatment

Research has found that regular exercise can relieve muscle tension and help alleviate stress-related symptoms such as tension headaches, anxiety, depression and some other mood disorders. Other ways to reduce the effects of stress in the long term, and help to decrease the incidence of tension headache, include:

- Aerobic exercise such as cycling, swimming or walking
- Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation and hypnosis
- Consultation with a psychologist to improve stress management
- Addressing the musculoskeletal tension with chiropractic or physiotherapy
- Antidepressant medication.

Reducing stress in your life

Regular tension headaches could be a warning sign that your life is out of balance. It is important to address the various sources of stress in your life and make realistic changes. Chronic stress is also a contributing factor to more serious illnesses, such as heart disease.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Complementary therapy practitioner
- Psychologist
- Chiropractor
- Physiotherapist

Things to remember

- There may be a number of factors that contribute to the onset of tension headaches - stress is one of the more common.
- People who are prone to anxiety and depression are more likely to suffer from tension headaches.
- Women may experience greater stress because of their demanding lifestyles.
- Short term treatment options for tension headache include massage, relaxation, exercise and painkillers.

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