

## Headache - different types explained

Headache is one of the most common health related conditions in Australia, with around 15 per cent of us taking painkillers for a headache at any given time. It is likely that nearly all of us will experience headache during our lifetime. People of any age can be affected, but a recent study undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that people between the ages of 25 and 44 years were more likely to report having a headache. There are a number of different types of headache and many different causes, which explains why the condition is so common.

Headache can be classified into two broad categories - primary and secondary. Examples of primary headache include migraine, cluster or tension headache. Secondary headaches are triggered by an underlying disorder - such as infection, injury or tumour - and can be considered as a side effect of the main illness.

### Pain receptors

Pain is felt when various structures of the head are inflamed or irritated. These structures include:

- The muscle and skin of the head
- Nerves of the head and neck
- The arteries leading to the brain
- The membranes of the ear, nose and throat.
- The sinuses, which are air-filled cavities inside the head that form part of the respiratory system.

The sensation of pain can also be 'referred', which means that pain occurring in one area can transmit the feeling of pain to an area nearby. An example is the referred pain of a headache arising from a sore neck.

### Causes of headaches

Different stimuli can cause headaches. Anything which stimulates the pain receptors in the head and neck can cause a headache, including:

- Dental or jaw problems
- Injuries to the neck
- Eye strain
- Muscular tension
- High blood pressure
- Disorders of the nose, ear or throat.

### Common primary headaches

The different types of primary headache are caused by a variety of factors and require different treatments.

#### Tension headache

Tension headache is the most common type of headache. Two out of three people will have at least one tension headache in their lifetime. Tension headache:

- Feels like a tight band of pressure around the head
- Often associated with muscle tightness in head, neck or jaw
- Can be caused by physical or emotional stress

- Is best treated by making lifestyle adjustments, such as exercise, diet, stress management and attention to posture.

## **Migraine headache**

Three times as many women (15 per cent) as men (5 per cent) suffer from migraine, and hormones are thought to play a significant role. Migraine headache:

- Feels like a throbbing or pulsing pain.
- Sometimes includes other symptoms, such as visual disturbances, numbness of the face or extremities, nausea and vomiting.
- Is associated with a spasm of the blood vessels leading to the brain.
- Can be triggered by many different things, including food, stress, heat and cold, strong smells, emotions, fatigue or hormonal fluctuations.
- Is treated with medications and lifestyle modifications, such as avoiding factors that trigger an attack.

## **Cluster headache**

Cluster headaches are relatively uncommon and tend to mainly affect men. Cluster headaches:

- Usually involve severe pain, localised to one eye.
- Include other symptoms, like swelling and watering of the affected eye.
- Can be triggered by alcohol and cigarettes, but the underlying cause is unknown.
- Is treated with medication or oxygen therapy.

## **Secondary headaches**

A secondary headache is a side effect of another disorder. Headache can be 'secondary' to:

- Head injury
- Meningitis
- Sinus infection
- Brain tumour
- A variety of eye diseases
- Spinal injury
- Arthritis
- Inflammation of the arteries (temporal arteritis).

## **Diagnosis of a headache**

Persistent headaches need to be medically investigated. Tests can include scans, eye tests and sinus x-rays. The different factors that are considered when diagnosing a headache include:

- Location of the pain, such as around one eye or over the scalp
- The degree of pain experienced
- Duration of the headache
- Other symptoms, such as visual disturbances or a sore neck
- How often the headache recurs
- The factors that worsen the headache, such as certain foods
- The factors that improve the headache, such as massage.

## **Treatment for headaches**

Treating a headache depends on its cause. Some of the various treatments include:

- Over-the-counter painkillers, such as aspirin or paracetamol
- Relaxation techniques, such as massage
- Alterations to the diet
- Alternative therapies, such as acupuncture or chiropractic
- Stress management
- Prescription medication

- Treatment for the underlying disorder if the headache is secondary.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Neurologist
- Pharmacist
- Complementary medicine professional

## Things to remember

- Headache is a common disorder, with around 15 per cent of Australians taking painkillers for headache at any given time.
- There are different types of headache and many causes, which explains why the condition is so common.
- Types of headache include tension, cluster and migraine.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Headache.com.au

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

**Copyright** © 1999/2012 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel ([www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.