

Headache - treatment options

Headache is one of the most common illnesses in Australia, with around 15 per cent of us taking painkillers for a headache at any given time. There are many different types of headache and many different causes, which explains why the condition is so common. Most headaches have more than one contributing factor. Some of the more common triggers for headache are lifestyle related, such as poor diet, stress, muscle tension, and lack of exercise. Serious underlying disorders, such as brain tumours, are rarely the cause of headache although they should always be examined by a doctor.

Successfully treating chronic headache usually requires a combined approach that takes into account the individual triggers. Consult with your doctor or health care professional for help in treating chronic headache or migraine. Your doctor can refer you to appropriate healthcare experts, such as ear, nose and throat specialists, neurologists, optometrists and chiropractors.

Problems of the musculoskeletal system

Misalignments of the spine and neck, poor posture and muscle tension can refer pain into the head. Common therapies that can successfully treat recurring headache caused by musculoskeletal problems include:

- Chiropractic
- Osteopathy
- Physiotherapy.

Dietary problems

Some foods can cause headache in susceptible people. It is important to seek professional help. Self-diagnosis of food sensitivities can result in unnecessary diets which may not work. Health care professionals who can assist in tracking down the triggers of food related headache include:

- Doctors
- Dietitians
- Naturopaths.

Dental problems

If the teeth of the upper and lower jaw fail to meet smoothly, the resulting muscle tension in the jaw can cause headache. Treatment options include correcting the bite, replacing missing teeth or using occlusal splints, which allow the jaw to close without dental interference. Surgery may be needed in severe cases. Tooth decay, abscesses and post-extraction infection can cause headache and need to be professionally treated by a dentist.

Eye problems

Many of the eye problems that contribute to headache can be successfully treated with prescription glasses or contact lenses. Consult with a qualified eye care specialist such as an optometrist.

Infections

Many infections of the nose, throat and ear can cause headache. Depending on the disorder, treatment options can include drugs such as antibiotics decongestants or antihistamines. Persistent problems, such as chronic tonsillitis, may need surgery as a final resort. Consult with an ear, nose and throat specialist.

Neurological problems

Neurologists specialise in disorders of the nerves and brain. Only a minority of headaches are caused by serious problems such as brain tumours, but they need to be ruled out through medical examination. Usually, you will only be referred to a neurologist once all other causes of chronic headache have been investigated and eliminated. Some neurological tests include CT and MRI scans. Treatment options depend on the disorder.

General treatment options

Other options for treating headache and migraine include:

- Treating any underlying disorders which may be contributing, such as high blood pressure.
- Painkilling drugs.
- Medications that act on the arteries.
- Eliminating any drugs that may be causing headache as a side effect, such as birth control pills.
- Stress management.

Choosing a complementary therapy practitioner

Your doctor can refer you to appropriate specialists, such as neurologists or ear, nose and throat surgeons. In most cases, your doctor may also have a list of trusted complementary therapists. However, if you need to find a qualified complementary therapist without your doctor's recommendation, some suggestions include:

- Contact the professional association for your chosen therapy and ask for a list of members in your area.
- Ask your friends for word-of-mouth recommendations.
- During the first visit with your practitioner, ask about their training and qualifications.
- Treat as suspect any practitioner who advises you to abandon your conventional medical treatment.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Chemist
- Neurologist
- An accredited practising dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia
- Dentist or orthodontist
- Ear, nose and throat specialist
- Chiropractor, osteopath, physiotherapist
- Eye care professional for example an optometrist or ophthalmologist
- Complementary medicine practitioner.

Things to remember

- Most headaches have more than one contributing factor.
- Successfully treating chronic headache means investigating and addressing each contributing factor.
- Always consult with your doctor or health care professional for advice on treating chronic headache.

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