



Headaches

PATIENT EDUCATION SERIES

What are headaches?

Headaches are common and generally are not serious. Approximately 50% to 75% of all teens report having at least one headache per month. However, more frequent headaches can be upsetting and worrisome. The most common headaches in your teens and early twenties are tension headaches and migraines. Sometimes these problems may require a visit to your medical provider.

What causes headaches?

Headaches are most commonly caused by:

Illness

Headaches often are a symptom of other illnesses. Viral infections, strep throat, allergies, sinus infection, and urinary tract infections can be accompanied by headaches. Fever may also be associated with headaches.

Skipping meals

Even if you're trying to lose weight, you still need to eat regularly. Fad diets and irregular eating can make you hungry and also give you a headache. Not getting enough fluids, especially on hot days or with increased exercise, can lead to dehydration and cause headache.

Drugs

Alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, amphetamines, diet pills, and other drugs may cause you to have headaches.

Other causes

Often headaches are triggered by life habits or diet including erratic sleep habits, stress, posture, sleep problems, or certain foods (chocolate, processed meats, aged cheese, MSG, red wine, dairy products). Caffeine intake, especially a sudden decrease in caffeine, can cause headache.

Sometimes, headaches can also be caused by prescribed medication, such as birth control pills, or tetracycline for acne. Less commonly, headaches can be caused by a dental infection or abscess, and jaw alignment problems (TMJ).

Although headaches are only rarely caused by eye problems, pain around the eyes--which can feel like a headache--can be caused by eye muscle imbalance or not wearing glasses that have been prescribed for you. Only in very **rare** cases are headaches a symptom of vascular problems, a brain tumor, high blood pressure or other serious problem.

Common types of headaches

Tension headaches

These headaches often feel like a tight band around your head. The pain is dull and aching and usually will be felt on both sides of your head, but may be in the front and back as well. Tension headaches sometimes start in the shoulders and move upward to the back of the head.

Pressure at school or at home, arguments with parents, roommates, friends, having too much to do, and feeling anxious or depressed can all cause a tension headache. Signs of depression include loss of energy, poor appetite or overeating, loss of interest in usual activities, change in sleeping patterns (trouble falling asleep, waking in the middle of the night or too early in the morning), and difficulty thinking or concentrating.

Migraines

These headaches are often described as throbbing and usually are felt on only one side of your head, but may be felt on both. A migraine may make you feel lightheaded, with nausea and/or vomiting. You may see spots or be sensitive to light, sounds and smells. If you get migraines, chances are one of your parents or other family members also had this problem.

When should I see my medical provider?

If you are worried about your headaches or if they are disrupting your academic work, home or social life, see your medical provider. Other signs that may warrant medical evaluation include:

- **Head injury.** Headaches from a recent head injury should be checked right away--especially if you lost consciousness from the injury, or have memory loss surrounding the event.

- **Seizures.** Any headaches associated with seizures or fainting require immediate medical attention.
- **Frequency.** Your headaches are increasing in frequency, or you are using medication to treat the headaches more than twice/week.
- **Degree of Pain.** Headache pain is severe and prevents you from doing activities you want to do.
- **Time of attack.** Headaches that wake you from sleep or occur early in the morning.
Visual difficulties. Headaches that cause blurred vision, eyespots, or other visual changes.
- **Other associated symptoms.** If fever, vomiting, stiff neck, toothache, jaw or sinus pain accompany your headache, you should be evaluated by your provider

If certain foods are triggering your headaches, your provider may suggest eliminating these foods from your diet. If stress is the culprit, your provider can help you cope by suggesting special treatments such as relaxation exercises, biofeedback, massage, and exercise. Headaches related to emotional/psychological factors may best be addressed through psychological services to get to the cause of the problem.

Whatever the cause, headache pain is real. It is important to know that with appropriate medical intervention and follow-up, you can identify the source of your headaches and get this problem under control.

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How are headaches treated?

If your symptoms are consistent with a **tension headache**, with none of the more worrisome signs listed above, you can try over-the-counter ibuprofen or tylenol as treatment. Let your provider know if you are using over the counter medicines to treat your headaches more than twice per week or if you are not getting relief from these medicines.

Migraine sufferers should know that many new treatments are available, including medicines that help stop attacks at the very onset of symptoms as well as medicines that prevent migraine on an ongoing basis.

Whichever type of headache you get, and whatever the cause, your healthcare provider can explain why you get headaches and how they can be best controlled. Many different types of therapies are available, depending upon the cause of your headaches. These therapies include medication, diet, bio-feedback and other stress reduction measures.

A **headache diary** is helpful in both the diagnosis and treatment of headaches. A headache diary helps you keep track of the following: when headaches occur, how long they last, what you were doing when the headaches start, foods eaten prior to the headache, how much sleep you have had, symptoms that accompany the headache, medicines taken, and what seems to have made the headache better or worse.