Headaches

What are headaches?
Headaches are common and generally are not seri-
ous. 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 ill-
nesses. 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.

Recreational Drugs
Alcohol, marijuana, cocaine,
MMDA, stimulants 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, pos-
ture, 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 head-
ache.

Sometimes, headaches can also be caused by pre-
scribed 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. Prolonged use of electronics, laptops and other
screens can cause headache. 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 usu-
ally 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
friends or family, having too much to do, and feel-
ing anxious or depressed can all cause a tension
headache. Signs of depression also include loss of
energy, poor appetite or overeating, loss of inter-
est 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 light-headed, 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. Migraines, especially with any
warning signs preceding the onset of head-
ache (aura) have increased risks for hormonal
contraceptive users. It is very important to
let your provider know if you have migraines
and/or develop migraines using hormonal
contraception.

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.

• **Exercise-induced Headache.** Headaches that occur with onset of exercise or intense exercise should be evaluated.

• **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.

**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-counters, such as ibuprofen or naproxen or acetaminophen 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. Complementary medicine such as seeing a chiropractor, acupuncturist or massage therapist may be helpful.

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.

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 CAPS 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, we can identify the source of your headaches and get this problem under control.

**Sources**

“Up to Date”
BARRY L. HAINER, MD, and ERIC M. MATHESON, MD, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, South CarolinaAm Fam Physician. 2013 May 15;87(10):682-687.