

Neurology Department



Headaches



National
Neuroscience Institute

SingHealth

Understanding Headaches

Headaches are common medical complaints. For most, a headache is an annoyance that comes and goes. But when they start to occur regularly, studies, work, family and social activities can be affected. It can also cause significant concern and anxiety.

Fortunately, most headaches are not an indication of a serious medical condition and can be treated. However, medical attention should be sought for frequent or severe headaches.

Types of Headaches

- **Migraine**



Pain begins or stays on one side of the head

- Throbbing pain of moderate to severe intensity
- Physical activities make headaches worse
- Sensitivity to light, sound and smell
- Nausea or vomiting
- May be preceded by flashing lights
- Other symptoms, e.g. seeing zigzag lines and tingling or numbness of limbs

These associated symptoms may occur before or during a headache, and usually lasts an hour or less.

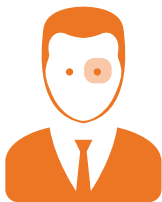
- **Tension Headache**

Feels like a tight band pressing around the head



- Pain is usually dull, steady and not throbbing
- No nausea or vomiting

- **Cluster Headache**



Pain always occurs on the same side of the head, usually over one eye

- There may be redness and tearing of the affected eye
- Other side of the head is unaffected

Diagnosing Headaches

Consult your doctor if you experience these:

- Frequent headaches that occur once or more a week
- Taking painkillers more than once a week
- Change in the pattern of a regular headache
- Stiff neck or fever with headache
- Headaches with dizziness, unsteady gait, slurred speech, weakness or numbness
- Confusion and drowsiness
- Headache that begins and persists after head injury
- First or the worst headache in your life
- Headache that begins after the age of 50
- If you have a new headache and a history of cancer, autoimmune disease or Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

Preventing Headaches

Most headaches have a genetic basis. Some may also be sensitive to certain triggers that can lead to a headache.

Lessen the impact of a headache by identifying triggers and avoiding them:

- External environment i.e. changes in weather, bright lights, smells and loud sounds
- Emotion, mood and stress
- Diet e.g. alcohol, cheese, chocolate, monosodium glutamate (MSG), citrus fruits
- Hormonal changes due to menstruation, menopause, oral contraception, hormone replacement therapy

Keeping a headache diary can help identify factors that may contribute to the headache and the pattern of the headache.

Living with Headaches

There are two types of treatment:

- Symptomatic treatments relieve the symptoms of pain and nausea
- Prophylactic treatments prevent headaches from occurring. These are taken on a regular basis, usually daily and may be in the form of oral medication or injection therapies.

A healthy lifestyle is also important:

- Get adequate sleep
- Eat at regular meal times
- Exercise regularly
- Avoid smoking
- Learn to cope with stress and manage your emotions

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