Tension-type headaches

Tension-type headaches are extremely common. Almost everyone has had one at some point. They can range in intensity from a dull ache to an unbearable pain, and can last from minutes to days. For some people, episodes might occur just a few times a year, while others experience them several times a week.

Tension-type headaches are believed to be caused by reactions of the nerves and blood vessels in your head and by tight muscles in the neck, shoulders and head. They may be triggered by physical or emotional stress. The pain may feel like a band around your head, and is generally dull and continuous with fluctuations in intensity.

Note your symptoms

Tension-type headaches are frequently triggered by emotional or physical stress. Figuring out just what these sources of stress are may require some detective work on your part. It may help to ask yourself these questions:

- Can you identify situations that consistently make you grit your teeth, tighten your shoulders or clench your fists, such as commuting, waiting in line or dealing with a difficult person?
- Do you squint your eyes while working or otherwise feel physically strained at work?
- Do overhead lights buzz, or does your home environment include loud or incessant noise?
- Do you slouch at your desk?
- Does your mattress leave you feeling sore and unsettled?

We all react differently to these situations. For many, the reaction is to tense up, resulting in a tension-type headache.

Once you identify situations that make you tense, try to find ways to manage them, such as:

- Exercising regularly
- Getting enough rest
- Stretching to loosen tight muscles
- Lowering a desk chair
- Using an anti-glare screen for your computer
- Installing a humidifier at home
• Consulting a therapist if there are family problems

What you can do

There are a number of things you can do to reduce pain and speed recovery if a tension-type headache occurs. Many reach for aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), acetaminophen (Tylenol), or naproxen (Aleve) and with good reason. These can often blunt or eliminate the pain of a tension-type headache. **NEVER give aspirin to children or teenagers, unless directed to do so by your healthcare provider. It can cause Reye's syndrome, a rare but often fatal condition. Note: NSAIDS such as ibuprofen or naproxen can cause stomach, heart or blood vessel problems so don't take them for long periods of time without consulting a doctor.**

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before taking over-the-counter (OTC) medications (including, vitamins and herbal supplements) if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, have a chronic condition or take any other medication.

Other methods for reducing or eliminating headache pain include:

- Soaking in a hot bath or lying down in a darkened room with an ice bag (wrapped in cloth) on your forehead. If a warm, wet cloth feels better, use that.
- Slowly stretching out stiff muscles
- Having someone massage tense muscles or using your own fingertips to massage your neck, face and scalp
- Taking a short nap

You can probably come up with additional relaxation methods that can help relieve stress-related pain.

If a child has a headache, try to get a sense of what might be causing tension or stress in his or her life. The child may mention some surprising things, such as anxiety about supposedly “fun” activities, as well as pressures from school or friends. Some children may simply be asking for attention. In any case, talk to the child gently and have him or her lie down in a darkened room with a cool cloth draped over the forehead.

What your doctor may do

The nature and frequency of your headaches may reveal possible causes to a healthcare provider. Diagnosis will involve your answering a series of questions about your lifestyle and circumstances and you may receive a full physical examination. If the cause of your headaches remains unclear, you may be given an imaging test such as a **CT scan** (computed tomography) or an **MRI** (magnetic resonance imaging).

Common causes of headache that need to be ruled out are too little or too much sleep, jet lag, stuffy environments, pollution, drinking too much alcohol or headaches that are side effects of certain
medications. If your headache pain typically affects only one side of the head, or if it is accompanied by upset stomach or visual disturbances, you may have a migraine. Migraines usually begin in young adulthood and recur in a similar pattern over a lifetime. These types of headaches are far less common, however; only 2 to 7 percent of headache sufferers experience migraines. More powerful medication may be prescribed to treat migraine pain.

Final note

Many people worry that their headaches may be caused by a serious condition, but this is rarely the case. Tension headaches often respond well to common sense stress relieving techniques. If you continue to get headaches after trying such measures, or if your prescribed treatment plan fails to provide relief, contact your doctor.

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