

Headaches

A headache is not a disease, but it may indicate that something is wrong. Headaches are common and generally are not serious. Approximately 50% to 75% of all teens report having at least one headache per month. The most common headaches for people in their teens and early twenties are tension headaches and migraines. Sometimes these problems may require a visit to your primary care provider.

CAUSES

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 are 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 sleep problems, minor head injuries, 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 a brain tumor, high blood pressure or other serious problem.

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.

Migraine Headaches: 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.

WHEN TO SEEK CARE

If you are worried about your headaches or if they are disrupting your academic work, home or social life, schedule an appointment with your primary care 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 were knocked out by the injury.
- **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 primary care provider.

TREATMENT

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. New treatments, including medicines that help stop attacks at the very onset of symptoms as well as medicines that prevent migraines on an ongoing basis, are available for migraine sufferers.

Whichever type of headache you get, and whatever the cause, your primary care provider can explain why you get headaches and how they can be best controlled. Different types of therapies are available, depending upon the cause of your headaches. These therapies include medication, diet, biofeedback and other stress reduction measures.

A headache diary is helpful in both the diagnosis and treatment of headaches. A headache diary helps you track the following:

- When headaches occur, how long they last.
- What you were doing when the headaches start.
- Foods eaten prior to the headache, medicines taken.
- How much sleep you have had.
- Symptoms that accompany the headache.
- What seems to make 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.

SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT AT UHS

Call 275-2662 to schedule an appointment. Visits are confidential.

LINKS

WebMD
http://my.webmd.com/content/article/46/1826_50669?z=1826_00000_000_0_rl_01

National Headache Foundation
<http://www.headaches.org/consumer/generalinfo/headachefaq.html>