

Self-Care Guide - Headache

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you develop an occasional headache. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

Common types of headache

The most common headache is tension-type headache – the one we think of as 'ordinary' or 'everyday' headache. Tension headache tends to be mild to moderately severe and affects both sides of the head. It usually feels 'pressing' or 'tightening' and is not affected by routine daily activities. Migraine is a moderate or severe throbbing headache affecting one or both sides of the head and made worse by ordinary daily activities.

Less common causes of headache

These include cluster headache (a severe or very severe pain around and above the eye), headache from overusing pain killers (affecting about one to two out of 100 people), inflamed blood vessels, and raised pressure inside the head (for example from a bleed or tumour).

Headaches are common

As many as 8 out of 10 people have occasional tension-type headache from time to time, and 1 or 2 out of 10 people suffer migraines.

Migraine triggers

Migraines can have many triggers, such as certain foods, stress, hunger, tiredness and can get worse during menstrual changes or when taking the combined oral contraceptive pill.

What can I expect to happen?

Rarely serious

Although headaches can severely affect your life, they're rarely serious or life-threatening. Most get better by themselves, often within 24 hours.

Tests You won't usually need further tests, such as scans or blood tests.

What can I do myself to get better – now and in the future?

Headache diary

Keep a headache diary and record how often you get headaches, how long they last, and whether they are mild, moderate or severe. This can be helpful to decide whether your headaches follow a particular pattern and shows how they respond to treatment, which is useful when you need to discuss them with a health professional. A useful online version for monitoring migraine headache is available on the National Migraine Clinic website.

Lifestyle

Try to get plenty of rest and sleep, and use every opportunity to relax.

Diet and fluids Drink at least 6 to 8 glasses of fluid (ideally water) a day. Avoid alcohol and take regular meals.

Pain killers

Various pain killers are available without prescription from your pharmacist. Choosing a preparation often comes down to personal preferences and needs to take into account other medical conditions that you may have, other medicines that you may be taking, and the risk of potential side effects. Special migraine medications are available for treating migraine attacks. Avoid taking painkillers for headaches for more than 10 to 15 days per month.

See an optician

One of the commonest reasons for headaches is visual problems. Please book an appointment to see your optician for them to assess your vision. The optician can also check the backs of your eyes for any signs of raised pressure in the head.

Other treatments

Acupuncture can help with migraine and tension type headache. Riboflavin (available as a food supplement from health food shops) may help reduce migraine frequency and intensity in some people. Manual therapy may help if you also suffer from neck aches.

When should I seek medical help?

Seek medical advice if over the counter treatments don't relieve your symptoms, or if you find it difficult to get on with your daily activities or go to work. Also speak to a health professional if you notice any of the following:

Frequency

Your headaches become more and more frequent.

Additional symptoms

You vomit for no apparent reason or have a high fever. You develop a stiff neck or feel drowsy.

After head injury

You suffer from persisting headaches after a blow or other injury to your head (though a mild headache for one to two days after a head injury is common and usually harmless).

Sleep

Your headache prevents you from getting to sleep or wakes you.

Certain situations

Your headache is worse on coughing, straining, bending, lying flat or laughing.

Speech and personality

You notice a change in speech or personality.

Odd sensations

You develop weakness, numbness or other odd sensations anywhere on your body, or you feel unsteady on your feet.

Severity

You develop a sudden severe headache, like 'being hit with a hammer'.

Eyes

Your eyes feel really uncomfortable when looking at bright light, or you suffer other new eye symptoms, such as sudden blind spots.

Others symptoms

You have muscle pains, pain on chewing, a tender scalp, or feel unwell.

Where can I find out more?

NHS Website (<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/headache/Pages/Introduction.aspx>) and the **Pain Toolkit** (www.pain toolkit.org) have more information on how you can treat and prevent headache. Your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms.