

Taking the Fear Out of Headaches LEARN WHAT TO AVOID AND HOW CHIROPRACTIC MAY HELP

Headache pain is considered the most common affliction of Americans, with at least 90 percent of the population suffering from at least one headache during their lifetimes.

Are you fearful of changes in the weather? What about additives in foods like MSG, nitrates, or sulphites? Do you have reasons to avoid chocolate or caffeine? If you miss a meal, do you wait for the inevitable result? Though these may seem like fairly innocuous sources of fear, those who suffer from headaches and are *fortunate* enough to know their “triggers” are all too familiar with that feeling of impending doom when they encounter something that is known to cause a headache.

An estimated half billion dollars are spent each year on pain medication for the relief of headaches. Headache pain is considered the most common affliction of Americans, with at least 90 percent of the population suffering from at least one headache during their lifetimes. Headaches range in severity from the mildly annoying to completely incapacitating. Whichever form your headache takes, it is helpful to know what the types of headache are and where – and when – to seek relief.

Types of Headache

When headaches strike, some fear the worst – brain tumor or stroke. Headaches that arise for

these reasons are rare, accounting for no more than five percent of all headache pain. These few headaches are referred to as **secondary** headaches, since the headache itself is the result of another problem. The remaining 95 percent of headaches are **primary** headaches, that is, the headache *is* the problem. Primary headaches include the tension-type, cervicogenic, migraine, and cluster headaches.

Muscle contraction, or tension headaches, are by far the most common of all headaches, affecting men and women equally. They are often characterized by tightening in the neck and scalp.

Cervicogenic headaches are those which, as the name suggests, originate from dysfunction in the cervical spine. These headaches are characterized by pain in the neck, and possibly in the shoulders.

Vascular headaches are the result of blood vessels in the head dilating and constricting, and they include migraine and cluster headaches.

Migraine headaches occur more often in women than men. In some instances, the headache is accompanied by an “aura” or visual disturbance. These headaches can be severe enough to limit normal activities.

Cluster headaches affect more men than women, and are considered rare. Characterized by a series of intense, painful headaches that last from a few minutes to hours at a time, the headaches occur in a general pattern – such as every day at approximately the same time, for the same amount of time, for a “cluster period” which can be weeks or months. These headaches are considered the worst type.

What Causes Headaches?

Tension headaches and cervicogenic headaches may result from dysfunctions in the vertebrae of the spine, as well as muscle spasms. These may result from physical injury, excessive exertion,



In the October 2, 2007, issue of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, the journal of the American College of Physicians, clinical guidelines for doctors were published on the treatment of low back pain. Titled “Diagnosis and Treatment for Low Back Pain: A Joint Clinical Practice Guideline from the American College of Physicians and the American Pain Society,” the guidelines are intended to provide health care providers with information on the most effective way to manage low back pain – as shown in the research literature.

The guidelines prove to be good news for chiropractors – since their methods of care are noted for their effectiveness. The diagnosis recommendations mirror those used by chiropractors: “clinicians should conduct a focused history and physical examination ... ” and clinicians should obtain diagnostic imaging only in cases where severe problems or physical injury are suspected.

As for treatment, the recommendations are simple: “For patients who do not improve with self-care options, clinicians should consider the addition of nonpharmacologic therapy with proven benefits – for acute low back pain, spinal manipulation; for chronic or subacute low back pain, intensive interdisciplinary rehabilitation, exercise therapy, acupuncture, massage therapy, spinal manipulation, yoga, cognitive-behavioral therapy, or progressive relaxation ... ” (Chou R, et al. *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Vol. 147, No. 7, pp. 478-491.)

Chiropractic HealthWays® is published bi-monthly by the FOUNDATION FOR CHIROPRACTIC EDUCATION AND RESEARCH 380 Wright Rd. P. O. Box 400 Norwalk, IA 50211-0400, www.fcer.org

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sleeping incorrectly, poor posture, or stress. The imbalances caused by these problems cause the muscles of the neck, shoulders, and head to tighten. This tightening – or tension – is the source of these types of headache. An evaluation by your Doctor of Chiropractic can locate the cause of these headaches.

Illustrated HealthWays

Keeping a Headache Diary

Before your chiropractic appointment for treatment of headaches, consider the following questions and bring your answers to the appointment. If you suffer from frequent headaches, keep a daily journal answering the pertinent questions (marked with a star) – it may help you and your doctor to recognize headache triggers.

1. How old are you now, and at what age did your headaches begin?
2. Have you had any changes in diet, stress, habits, or lifestyle?*
3. Did anything unusual occur before the headache started?*
4. How often do they occur?
5. Do headaches occur at regular intervals or at specific times of the day?*
6. Where do you experience pain first?*
7. How intense is the pain?* (Categorizing pain on a 1= no pain to 10=severe pain scale may be helpful.)
8. How quickly do your headaches begin and how long does it take for pain to peak?*
9. How long do your headaches last?*
10. Do other symptoms appear before the actual pain?*
11. Do other symptoms accompany the headache at all – and in what order do they appear?*
12. What relieves the pain?*
13. Do other family members get headaches?
14. What prompted you to seek chiropractic treatment now?
15. How often do you take over-the-counter medications, and what kind do you take?

The following symptoms are often associated with tension and cervicogenic headache:

- Constant, dull pain in the scalp or neck,
- Stiffness in the shoulders or neck muscles,
- Headaches occurring regularly after periods of work or stress, and,
- Headache pain radiating from the back of the neck to the head.

Migraine headaches can be caused by vascular, biochemical or neurologic involvement. Migraines can be initiated by various factors called “triggers.”

Common triggers include: changes in weather, season, altitude, time zone, sleep patterns, meal times, or hormone levels (menstruation, menopause, pregnancy). Other triggers include bright or flickering lights, pollution, stuffy rooms, and some foods (chocolate, caffeine, citrus fruits, aged cheese, nuts, onions), or food additives (MSG, nitrates, nitrites, sulphites).

Many migraine headaches are also related to misalignment of the vertebrae of the neck. Vertebral misalignments in the neck can cause compression or irritation of the spine nerve roots causing headache pain. Irritation of spinal nerves can also lead to constriction of blood vessels, precipitating a vascular headache.

The following symptoms may indicate the occurrence of migraine headache:

- Throbbing pain on one side of the head (may alternate),
- Headache pain associated with symptoms such as nausea, visual disturbances, light or noise sensitivity,
- Headache pain triggered by certain foods.

Your Doctor of Chiropractic is highly qualified and educated to evaluate patients for each of the various headache types and can outline a treatment plan for their control, relief of pain, and prevention of recurrence.

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Your Chiropractor Can Help

Much confidence has been placed in chiropractic care for the relief of various types of headache. The first step in the chiropractic process is the full evaluation of your case by your chiropractor. This evaluation may include the gathering of a complete history, a physical and spinal examination, X-rays (if clinically indicated), and possibly blood and/or urine tests. The evaluation will also include an interview with you to discuss potential triggers and other factors that may influence your headaches and symptoms. To aid both you and your chiropractor, keep a list of symptoms such as those presented in the Headache Diary in the "Illustrated HealthWays."

From the information acquired in this evaluation, the cause of the headaches can be determined. If it is decided that chiropractic can be efficient and effective, then a treatment plan will be discussed with you. Chiropractic treatment may consist of spinal adjustments (sometimes called manipulation) to improve function and reduce nerve irritation and muscle spasm. Recommendations may also be given about diet, sleeping habits, posture, nutrition, and exercise.

If the findings of your chiropractor suggest a condition requiring attention from another health care provider, the appropriate referral will be made. The caring attention and healing methods used by your chiropractor make this form of care a logical first choice in the search for headache relief.

Managing Headaches at Home

There are many methods of home relief from headaches that should be tried before reaching for the bottle of aspirin or other pain reliever.

- *Discover and avoid your triggers* is the first important step, not only to relieve the current headache but to prevent future headaches.
- *Avoid changing eating and sleeping schedules.*
- *Learn to relax!* Your Doctor of Chiropractic can offer advice on techniques that can help you to relax. Hot showers, dark quiet rooms, and soft music may help.
- *Exercise regularly.* Exercise has been shown to elevate blood levels of endorphins, the body's natural pain killers.
- *Avoid taking over-the-counter (OTC) pain relievers.* Some headaches can be aggravated by OTC medications, especially if they contain caffeine. The side effects of these medications can also be troubling (ulcers, gastrointestinal bleeding, liver damage), and the risk of these increases with increased use. These medications also lead to "rebound headaches," which are headaches that occur because the medication is leaving your system.

If you are a frequent sufferer of headaches, see your chiropractor immediately, and begin a program to actively eliminate the cycles of pain.

Don't Forget the Weights!

In addition to getting your 20 to 30 minutes of aerobic exercise most days a week, a good fitness routine should also include strength training, according to updated guidelines from the American College of Sports Medicine and the American Heart Association. Both groups now recommend strength training of the major muscle groups at least twice each week. The guidelines suggest that adults perform 8 to 12 repetitions of 8 to 10 exercises that target muscles in the chest, back, shoulders, upper legs, lower legs, and arms. These exercises may be done with free weights, machines, or weight-bearing exercise – and *adults must take into account their fitness levels before beginning and use appropriate weights.* Adults over the age of 65, or those with conditions limiting their training, will benefit by doing strength training two or three times each week and doing more repetitions with lighter weights. Among the many known benefits of maintaining strong muscles are an improved immune system, a faster metabolism, and greater bone density. *MSNBC.com. September 2, 2007.*

Children and Heartburn

More American children than ever are receiving prescriptions for medications for heartburn and the problem may be related to increased numbers of obesity. After looking at prescription drug data for over 575,000 children, researchers at a drug benefits management company found that there has been a 56 percent increase (compared to 2002) in the number of children up to the age of 4 who are taking prescription drugs for the treatment of heartburn, acid reflux, and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). Among children 5 to 11, there has been a 31 percent increase in prescriptions for these drugs, and there is a six percent increase for children aged 12 to 18. What concerns some is that some evidence suggests that long-term use of these drugs may lead to increased risk of infections such as pneumonia and bowel inflammation. Also, heartburn and acid reflux are common in young children, and most will naturally outgrow the condition without medication. Dr. Renee Jenkins, president-elect of the American Academy of Pediatrics, urges parents to try non-drug approaches to treating these problems in children to avoid medication over-use. Simple potential remedies include providing children with smaller but more frequent meals, and cutting their intake of fatty foods. *Associated Press. October 4, 2007.*

Q What can cause headaches?

A Headaches can result from many conditions. For example, sitting hunched over a desk or computer for hours can cause prolonged muscle contractions in the neck, back, and head. This can temporarily deprive the muscles of oxygen, injuring them and sending pain signals to the brain. Structural problems in the neck and back can also result from such strains and cause more tension

headaches. In fact, in some 90 percent of the cases reported at New York's Stuyvesant Polyclinic Headache Clinic, the headaches were described as "a referred symptom caused by mechanical derangement of the cervical spine [neck]." Doctors of Chiropractic are particularly well-qualified to diagnose and treat such structural conditions.

Q How can I know what causes my headaches?

A You might find out through trial-and-error. By eliminating possible causes, one at a time, you may discover what triggers your tension or toxic headaches and know what to avoid in the future. But if you have recurring or chronic tension or toxic headaches, you should ask your Doctor of Chiropractic to help you locate and correct what is

causing them. If you suffer from more disabling vascular headaches (migraine or cluster), definitely seek your Doctor of Chiropractic's advice. Clinical experience has shown that significant numbers of migraine sufferers can benefit from chiropractic treatment.

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SHOULD BE SHARED.
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