

Tension headache

Emergency Department factsheets



What is a tension headache?

Some people have tension headaches only once or twice a year, while others may have frequent or even daily attacks. If left untreated, a tension headache can go on for days or weeks without relief. Despite the discomfort, most people can continue with their usual activities.

What causes a tension headache?

A tension headache is thought to be due to muscle tightness in the scalp, forehead and the back of the neck. This can be triggered by:

- tension and stress
- tiredness
- long periods of reading, typing or concentration (eye strain)
- poor posture
- spine and neck injuries
- high blood pressure
- physical or emotional stress.

What are the symptoms?

A tension headache may feel like a tight band around the head, a dull ache on both sides of the head or a heavy weight on top of the head.

There may also be aching and tightness in the neck and shoulders. Tension headaches tend to worsen as the day goes on.

Treatment

You will be assessed by a doctor or nurse and advised of the best treatment. Tests are not normally needed. Most people find pain relief eases the severity of a tension headache. Pain relief is safe when used as directed. Ask your

doctor or health care professional which of the following is the most appropriate for you:

- Paracetamol on its own or combined with codeine (such as Panadeine)
- Aspirin (do not use in children)
- Ibuprofen.

Once treatment starts you should be able to return to your everyday activities.

If your headaches are caused by neck problems, you may be helped by the following therapies:

- Physiotherapy
- Acupuncture
- Massage.

If symptoms persist, you may need tests such as CT scans (a specialised scan), blood tests and eye tests. Medication may be needed on a daily basis. Your local doctor can refer you to other health care professionals for treatment, depending on your needs.

If you suffer from frequent headaches, see your local doctor. Writing your symptoms in a diary can help in working out a treatment plan.

Although a headache may be a warning sign of a more serious problem, this is rare.

Home care

When you have the headache, take pain relief and rest in a dark room. Sometimes having a warm bath or shower, or applying a warm or cold cloth over the aching area can help.

You should not solely rely on pain relief medication. The most effective long-term treatment is to make simple lifestyle changes that reduce the frequency of your headaches.

Be guided by your doctor or health-care professional, but some helpful tips include:

- learn ways to manage your stress
- find ways to relax, such as yoga, massage or meditation
- have a healthy diet
- drink plenty of water
- exercise regularly – you release ‘feel good’ chemicals (endorphins) from your brain when you exercise
- maintain a good posture when you are upright, try not to slouch when sitting as this puts strain onto neck and back muscles.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

See your local doctor or return to the emergency department if:

- you get a headache that is severe and ‘out of the blue’ (a sudden onset)
- the pain is worse when you cough, sneeze or strain
- the pain is getting worse, despite taking pain relief
- the pain is worse when you lie down
- you become drowsy, or confused
- your vision becomes blurred, or you have any visual disturbance
- you are generally unwell, including vomiting.

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

Want to know more?

Visit the Brain Foundation website

www.brainfoundation.org.au

Visit the Headache and Migraine Information website

www.headache.com.au

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