

# your health

## Headache Newsletter

### Headaches

#### When to seek medical attention for a headache.

Most everyone suffers from occasional headaches, and some can be quite uncomfortable. But most are only temporarily disabling. In fact, headache is one of the most frequent reasons that adults seek treatment from a family physician. It is estimated that 20 million Americans see a physician each year for help in treating chronic headaches. This figure represents only about half the number of people who experience headaches, since many people never seek medical care for headache management.

#### When is a headache serious?

Not every headache requires medical intervention. Some headaches result from meals or muscle tension and can be taken care of at home. Other headaches are a sign of something serious and call for quick

medical evaluation. If you experience the following headache symptoms, you should seek emergency medical attention:

- Severe, sudden headache that comes on quickly and unexplained, at times described as "the worst headache in my life"
  - Headache associated with loss of consciousness, confusion, changes in your vision, or other associated body weakness
  - Headaches associated with a stiff neck and fever
- If you experience the following headache symptoms, you should seek medical attention:

- Headaches that wake you from sleep
  - Unexplained changes in the nature or frequency of headaches
- If you are uncertain about the nature of your headaches, it's a good idea to call your doctor or nurse information service to see whether you need medical attention.

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### Tension Headaches

Tension or muscle contraction headaches are the most common form of headache, and they are often associated with periods of increased stress. Emotional factors alone are not the only triggers for tension headaches. Certain postures that produce tension on the head and neck (such as straining to read or awkward positioning while talking on the phone) along with activities that require increased periods of eyestrain can result in tension headaches.

More serious disorders that can cause tension headaches include degenerative arthritis of the neck and temporomandibular joint dysfunction, a disorder of the joint between the temporal bone and the lower jaw that results from poor biting and jaw clenching.

The pain associated with tension headaches is often steady and dull and can be felt in the forehead, temple area and back of the neck. People often describe tension headaches as feeling like a tight band is encircling their head. Although tension headaches can last for longer periods, they usually disappear after the stressful period is over. Tension headaches are usually not associated with other symptoms and there is no pre-headache syndrome as is often seen in migraine

headaches. Tension headaches account for about 90 percent of all headaches.

Although the exact cause of tension headaches is not known, many scientists believe that the primary cause of the pain is sustained muscle tension. Other studies have suggested that restricted blood flow may cause or contribute to the pain.

#### Treating tension headaches

Nonprescription painkillers such as aspirin, acetaminophen or ibuprofen most commonly relieve tension headaches. When severe muscle contraction is present, more powerful prescription drugs may be needed to get relief. Because these drugs may cause drowsiness and slow the reflexes, caution must be taken to avoid injury or accident when they are taken. Most physicians recommend only using prescription medications for short periods of time, usually no more than a few days. Your doctor may also treat you with preventive medication.

Other techniques that may be helpful in relieving tension headaches include heat application, warm showers, massage therapy and relaxation training. Of course, resolving the stressful event leading to the headache often will help in relieving a tension headache.

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# 10 Foods That May Trigger Migraines

People who have migraines are often desperate for ways to limit the pain and disability they cause. If you have migraines, it's important to find out what triggers your headaches. Once you know your triggers, you can take steps to avoid them.

Certain foods are well-known migraine triggers. Many of these problem foods contain tyramine. Tyramine is formed by the breakdown of an amino acid that occurs naturally in foods. The tyramine level is higher in foods that are aged, fermented or stored for long periods. Fresh foods have the lowest level.

## Ten foods that may trigger migraines

Eliminating the following foods from your diet could be the key to fewer headaches.

- **Alcohol**, such as red wine, sherry, vermouth, ale and beer
- **Caffeinated drinks**, such as coffee, tea and cola beverages (limit to 2 cups a day)
- **Chocolate**
- **Aged cheeses**, such as Swiss, blue, brie, mozzarella and cheddar
- **Food additives**, such as MSG (in seasoned salt, meat tenderizers and canned soups), sulfites (used to preserve dried fruit and wine), nitrites (a meat preservative) and aspartame (in diet drinks and sugarless gum)
- **Meats that are aged, smoked or dried, fermented, salted or pickled**, such as pepperoni, liverwurst, pickled herring, summer sausage and hot dogs

- **Certain vegetables**, including snow peas, pickles, olives, sauerkraut and fava beans
- **Fermented soy products**, such as soy sauce, teriyaki sauce and miso
- **Nuts and seeds**, including all tree nuts, peanuts, peanut butter, sesame seeds and pumpkin seeds
- **Leftovers that are more than a day old**

Skipping meals can also trigger migraines. Eat regular meals with a focus on fresh foods.

## Finding your food triggers

The foods listed above cause problems for many people, but not everyone has the same reaction to the same foods. An elimination diet can help you find what foods cause your migraines.

Start keeping a headache diary. Write down each time you have a headache and what you ate before it started. Then, eliminate all the listed foods from your diet. Note any changes in your headache pattern.

After two months, reintroduce one food from the list every two weeks. Only choose the foods that you enjoyed before. If the foods don't cause a change in your headache pattern, you probably aren't sensitive to them. Share the results of your headache diary with your doctor.

An elimination diet isn't easy. But the results can be well worth the effort.

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# Migraine Headaches

For many people, migraines begin with a dull ache. About one out of five of people who have them also have an “aura” before they start. They see wavy lines, dots, flashing lights, or have tunnel vision or blind spots. These headaches then turn into a constant, throbbing pain at the temples. Or, pain can be at the front or back of one side of the head. Migraines may cause nausea, vomiting and sensitivity to light and noise. They can last from a few hours to a few days.

Migraines can affect people of all ages—including children. But, they most often occur in people between ages 25 and 45. Women are three times more likely to have them. This probably is due to hormonal influences.

## Treatment

See your doctor if you have migraine headaches that are frequent or severe. There are medicines that he or she can prescribe to help ease the pain. Your doctor may also recommend that you consider preventive medication.

Some people also find that relaxation techniques are useful for acute headaches. But, the effectiveness of these techniques still is being studied. Talk with your doctor about other ways to relieve your headaches.

## Prevention

Migraines can be hereditary. Hormonal changes or menstruation also may cause them. Although it's not possible to control these triggers, there are other avoidable triggers and ways you can help prevent migraines:

- Keep a headache diary to help identify triggers or patterns to your migraines.
- Learn biofeedback or other stress management techniques.
- Eat healthy, well-balanced meals and avoid delaying or missing meals.
- Avoid migraine triggers, such as certain foods (red wine, aged cheese), alcohol, caffeine in excess, nitrates (bacon, hot dogs, salami) and food additives such as monosodium glutamate (MSG).
- Develop regular sleeping patterns.

Your doctor can recommend prescription medicines that may help. Taken daily, these medicines can help stop migraines before they start.

If you rarely get headaches but suddenly get the worst one of your life, seek medical attention immediately. If your headaches are getting worse, or if they seem unusual, contact your doctor.

## Belly Fat May Make Migraines More Likely

Being overweight may increase the risk of migraine headaches in young and middle-aged adults, suggests a U.S. study that included 22,211 people.

Age, gender and the way body fat was distributed affected migraine risk. People ages 20 to 55 who had larger waistlines were more likely to have migraines than those with smaller waistlines.

Migraine was reported by 37 percent of women in that age group who had excess abdominal fat, compared with 29 percent of those without abdominal obesity. Among men 20 to 55 years old, 20 percent of those with excess belly fat reported migraine, compared with 16 percent of those without it.

Among those older than 55, total body obesity wasn't associated with migraine in women or men. But the risk of migraine actually decreased among women older than 55 with large waistlines.

The study, which was released Thursday, is scheduled to be presented during the American Academy of Neurology's annual meeting in Seattle, April 25 to May 2.

"These results, while still in the early stages, suggest that losing weight in the stomach area may be beneficial for younger people who experience migraine, and especially so for women," study author Dr. B. Lee Peterlin, of Drexel University College of Medicine in Philadelphia, said in an American Academy of Neurology news release.

"Men and women have body tissue distributed in different ways," Peterlin said. "After puberty, women show more fatty tissue deposits in the hip and thigh area, while men predominately have more fatty tissue in the belly region. After menopause, women show more fatty tissue in the belly area as well. For some diseases, including heart disease and diabetes, excess fat around the waistline appears to be a stronger risk factor than total body obesity."

### More information

The U.S. National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke has more about migraine:

<http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/migraine/migraine.htm>

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## Migraines More Frequent, Intense in Overweight Kids

The more overweight children and teens are, the more numerous and severe their headaches, according to a U.S. study.

But losing weight eases the frequency and severity of the headaches, the researchers said.

The study, conducted at seven pediatric headache centers, found that 34.1 percent of patients were either overweight (17.5 percent) or at risk of becoming overweight. That's similar to rates of overweight in the general child/teen population.

The researchers analyzed data collected on 913 patients at the start of the study, and again at three and six months, and found evidence of a link between weight and headaches.

"Among children who are overweight at their initial headache center visit, a change in their body mass index (BMI) was associated with a change in the frequency of their headaches over time," study lead author Dr. Andrew

Hershey, director of the Headache Center at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, said in a hospital news release.

"While we can't claim a causal link between obesity and headache, the association suggests some physiological or environmental processes that are common to both conditions," he said.

The findings, published online in the journal *Headache*, have important implications for clinical practice, according to Hershey.

"Physicians should actively consider a child's weight in the context of treatments for headaches," he said. "They should routinely assess weight and BMI and be prepared to offer weight control information at the initial treatment visit."

### More information

The Nemours Foundation has more about children and headaches:

<http://kidshealth.org/parent/general/aches/headache.html>

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