

HEADACHE (Tension or Vascular)

TO YOUR HEALTH - PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

4.3

DESCRIPTION

Simple tension or vascular headaches are of 3 types:

- Pain from muscle strain in the scalp, neck, and face.
- Pain from constricted blood vessels in the head that cause pressure on blood vessel walls.
- Pain from dilated blood vessels in the brain.

These headaches can occur infrequently, such as one brought on by a stressful event, or they can occur on a chronic basis (sometimes every day).

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Moderate pain in the front or back of the head, accompanied by tight muscles in the neck or scalp. Constant pain over the temples, accompanied by the feeling that a vise is over the back of the head. Throbbing pain all over the head. Often present when you wake up. Insomnia.

CAUSES

- Anxiety or depression
- Eye strain, including sun glare
- Use of drugs or alcohol
- Low blood sugar
- Hormone changes during the menstrual cycle
- Allergic reactions
- Overuse of Over-the-counter pain medications
- Physically exhausting work
- Tension, producing strain on muscles of the neck, scalp, face, and jaw
- Sleep disturbances
- Excessive eating or drinking
- Dehydration

RISK INCREASES WITH

Stress, either mental or physical. Environments that are noisy, stuffy, hot, poorly lit, or have irritating odors. Exposure to or consumption of nitrites, sulfites, monosodium glutamate (MSG) or other food additives. Maintaining a sitting position for long periods (computer use).

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Get enough sleep (an average of 7-8 hours).
- Don't skip meals, especially breakfast; don't overeat.
- Exercise regularly to reduce tension and improve circulation.

- Drink alcohol moderately (no more than 1 or 2 drinks a day), if at all.
- Don't smoke cigarettes, and avoid smoky environments.
- Don't use mood-altering, mind-altering, stimulant, or sedative drugs.
- Avoid foods that contain nitrites or other additives to which you are sensitive.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

Most tension or vascular headaches can be relieved with simple treatment.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

None expected for a simple headache.

GENERAL MEASURES

If possible, stop what you are doing and try to relax: massage shoulders, neck, jaw, and scalp and take a hot bath or shower. Lie down. Place a warm or cold cloth, whichever feels better, over the aching area. Biofeedback training or counseling for chronic headaches caused by stress may help. For jobs requiring long hours of sitting, be sure to get up and move around at least once an hour. Laboratory studies, such as a CT scan for unremitting pain and to rule out other disorders may be indicated.

MEDICATION

You may take acetaminophen or aspirin to relieve pain. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications may be prescribed. Antidepressants may be prescribed for chronic tension headaches.

ACTIVITY & DIET

Rest in a quiet room while you have the headache. Participate in a regular physical fitness program. Focus on exercises that help muscles in the back, shoulders and neck. Most persons feel better if they don't eat, unless the headache is from low blood sugar. Don't drink alcohol. Avoid sudden changes in caffeine intake.

NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF...

Fever. Recent head injury. Drowsiness. Nausea or vomiting. Pain in one eye. Blurred vision. High blood pressure. Pain and tenderness around the eyes and cheekbones that worsens when you lean forward. Vision disturbances and vomiting prior to the headache. Persistent headache pain for longer than 24 hours without other symptoms. You suspect a prescription or non-prescription drug caused the headache.

Student Health Center

WWW.SIU.EDU/~SHC

This information is for educational purposes only. Consult your doctor for specific medical advice, diagnosis and treatment.

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618-453-3311

Dial-A-Nurse is available after-hours until 10:30 p.m. during fall and spring semesters. In case of emergency dial 911.

