

HEADACHE

Headache

Headache is one of the most common health complaints. Headaches are usually not serious and are often triggered by such factors as stress, fatigue, foods, or alcohol. Although many people believe that headaches are often caused by eyestrain due to improperly fitted eyeglasses, this is not true. Eyestrain and vision problems are not major causes of headaches, although most headaches are made worse by using your eyes for long periods without a rest break.

What causes headaches?

Most headaches can be divided into the following groups:

- tension-type headaches;
- migraine;
- cluster headaches;
- diseases of the eyes, ears, teeth, etc.

Tension-type headaches are the most common. The pain was once believed to result from muscles pulling in the neck and at the base of the head, but this explanation is probably not correct. Headache specialists are uncertain about the cause of this type of headache. The pain may be felt in areas such as the forehead, temples, or around the eyes. Pain also may occur in the neck, which led to the belief that sustained contraction of the neck muscles gave rise to the head pain. Tension-type headaches can result from a temporary increase of tension in daily life, such as stress at work or at home. They may result from sleeping or working in an unusual position, doing close work for long periods of time, jaw clenching, grinding of the teeth during sleep, or excessive gum chewing. These headaches are usually temporary and are often relieved by an over-the-counter pain reliever. However, taking pain relievers on a daily basis can make headaches worse.

Migraine headaches are another common type of headache. People who have migraines may have a more sensitive nervous system response. Migraine pain is related to activity in the brain that swells blood vessels of the scalp and in the covering layer of the brain. The exact cause of migraines is still unknown.

About one person in 10 suffers from migraines. Migraines are more common in women than in men. Some people appear to have a tendency toward migraine headaches, and migraines can run in families. Even young children may have migraines.

Some common symptoms of migraine headaches are:

- throbbing pain lasting for hours or several days;
- sensitivity to light, sounds, or odors;
- nausea or vomiting;
- pain that increases with movement.

Migraines may be associated with certain “triggers.” These include:

- dietary triggers—foods such as red wine and aged cheeses and substances such as monosodium glutamate (MSG) and nitrates or nitrites (used in hot dogs and other processed meats);
- irregular sleep patterns or too much or too little sleep;
- hormonal changes in women (menstruation and pregnancy);
- emotional stress or anxiety;
- environmental factors including fluorescent lights, computer screens, or temperature changes.

Keeping a diary of when migraines occur can help to identify triggers. Many individuals who have migraines mistakenly believe they have sinus headaches. Actually, sinus headaches are quite rare.

Cluster headaches are less common than migraines and occur more frequently in men than in women. They are called cluster headaches because they come in daily bouts that last for one to two months. These bouts can occur several times a year. Cluster headaches start without warning and can last anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours. The pain is felt on one side of the head and is very severe.

Other symptoms include:

- tearing or red eye on the affected side of the head;
- sweating;
- stuffy nose.

There are several drugs that are useful in treating cluster headaches.

Eye disease is the least common cause of headaches. Headaches caused by eye disease are usually felt in the eye or in the brow on the side where the disease occurs. These headaches are often associated with some other symptom, such as:

- blurred vision;
- halos around lights;
- extreme sensitivity to light.

Headaches can also be caused by high blood pressure. A blood pressure measurement is helpful in evaluating any lasting or recurring headaches. However, there are many people with high blood pressure who do not have headaches. Headaches caused by brain tumor or disease are rare and tend to become dramatically worse over time. In general, headaches can include symptoms that may affect vision (some migraines) or your eyes (tearing or red eye), yet they are not directly caused by eyestrain.

How is the cause of a headache diagnosed and treated?

Because headaches are such a common problem, a thorough medical examination by your primary care physician is recommended for any chronic or recurring headache. An eye exam by an ophthalmologist may be helpful in some cases. You can help your physician determine the cause of your headache by describing your symptoms, noting when the headaches occur, and providing a complete medical history, including any family history of recurring headaches. There are many treatments available depending on the type of headache you are experiencing.