



Information for Patients & Caregivers

What You Need to Know About Headache in Adults

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Headaches are a common problem that occur in everyone at some point in their life. They are one of the most common reasons that prompt people to consult a doctor.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN TYPES OF HEADACHES?

Headaches are pains that occur in any part of the head. There are several types of headache, and it is important to understand what type of headache you have.

The most common types of headaches are:

- **Tension headaches.** These occur as a tight band-like sensation across the forehead and usually last for several days. They tend to grow worse as the day progresses, but do not usually disturb sleep or everyday activities.
- **Migraines.** These are one-sided throbbing headaches and are usually painful enough to prevent you from doing your daily activities. You may have other symptoms, such as vomiting and over sensitivity to bright light or noise. They usually last for a couple of hours.
- **Cluster headaches.** These are very serious headaches that often reoccur daily for several days or weeks and then disappear for months on end. They cause pain around one eye and occur with other symptoms, such as watery red-eye and a runny nose.
- **Medication-overuse headaches** are caused by taking excessive painkiller medicines for headache.

Most headaches can be treated with over-the-counter painkillers but see a doctor if your headache persists despite treatment.

WHAT CAUSES HEADACHES?

Most headaches are not caused by any underlying disease and are therefore known as **Primary Headaches** by doctors. These include:

- Tension headaches.
- Migraine headaches.
- Cluster headaches.

The exact cause of these headaches is unclear, but factors such as stress and dehydration may contribute.

Headaches that are caused by a serious underlying problem are called **Secondary Headaches**. They include:

- **Brain infections**, such as meningitis (inflammation of the membranes around the brain).
- **Drug misuse or abuse**, such as *Medication Overuse Headache* and Illicit drug use.
- **Head injury.**
- **Headaches caused by pain in other parts of the head**, such as tooth or ear pain.
- **High Blood Pressure (Hypertension).**

WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR

See your Primary Care Doctor immediately if you develop headache with any of the following symptoms:

- Fever and or rash.
- Sudden severe headaches.
- Weakness in your face, arms, or legs.
- Difficulty in speaking or confusion.
- Headache that is worse with sitting or standing.
- A red or painful eye or changes in your vision.
- Unexplained vomiting.
- You are known to have low immunity due to Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) or are taking immune-suppressing drugs.
- You are known to have cancer.

WHAT YOUR DOCTOR WILL DO

Your doctor will ask questions about your symptoms, and whether you have any underlying diseases.

Your doctor will examine you for signs that might suggest a serious underlying cause of headache. If your symptoms and signs suggest a serious underlying cause, your doctor may order some tests to confirm the diagnosis.

Once the type or cause of your headache has been confirmed, your doctor will start treatment right away, especially if your headache is not due to a serious underlying cause.

In this case, your doctor may:

- Advise on some necessary changes to your lifestyle.
- Prescribe appropriate medications and discuss any potential side-effects.
- Schedule follow-up appointments to monitor your treatment.

If your headache is very severe or has a serious underlying cause, your doctor will refer you to a hospital for specialist investigation and treatment.



IMPORTANT TIP

Seek a doctor's advice if your over-the-counter treatments do not relieve your symptoms, or if you find it difficult to get on with your daily activities or go to work.

TREATMENTS FOR HEADACHES

The treatment for headaches depends on its cause. However, two main approaches are used:

Pain control treatments: Mainly used to relieve or prevent the pain. These include:

- **Painkiller medicines.** Over-the-counter pain relief medicines such as paracetamol and ibuprofen are the most common medications for treating headaches. Avoid taking painkillers for headaches for more than 10 to 15 days per month as overuse of painkillers can cause headaches.
- **Headache prevention medicines.** In some cases, the doctor may prescribe medicines for prevention of recurrent headaches such as migraine or cluster headaches. Examples of these classes of medicines include antidepressants, triptans and beta-blockers.

Treatment of Medication Overuse Headache.

- The only way to treat this type of headache is to discontinue the painkillers which are causing the problem. Examples of the painkillers that cause this headache are ibuprofen, aspirin, and codeine.

Lifestyle advice. In addition to pain-relief medicines, the doctor may also recommend the following lifestyle changes:

- Regular exercise and relaxation to help reduce stress.
- Taking regular meals.
- Avoiding migraine triggers such as stress, hunger, and certain oral contraceptive pills.
- Keeping a headache diary to record how often you get headaches, and their duration.

Discuss with your doctor to decide the best treatment plan for your headache.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOURSELF

The following are steps you can take to help yourself no matter what type of headache you have:

- **Drink** adequate amount of water daily.
- **Reduce** your daily intake of caffeine.
- **Ensure** your eye tests are up to date.
- **Sleep well.** Get at least 8 hours of sleep each night.
- **Reduce** the amount of screen time spent on laptops, mobile phones and other devices.
- **Avoid stress** where possible and try to develop healthy



Medication Overuse Headache is an important type of headache to watch out for.

This is because people who suffer from other types of headache, may develop this, if they take high doses of painkillers for a long time.

FOLLOW UP

If you have long-standing or recurrent headaches, you need to see your doctor regularly for check-ups during treatment.

During these follow-up visits, you can discuss your medications with your doctor.

Regular check-ups allow for monitoring of any underlying health condition that is associated with your headache and give an opportunity for health counselling and advice on lifestyle changes.

Always discuss with your doctor before taking any alternative medicine, herbal preparation, or over-the-counter medicines as they may react with prescribed medicines.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Additional information on Headaches in Adults can be found in the National Clinical Guideline published by The Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) Qatar.

The guideline is available for public on MOPH website:

www.moph.gov.qa

