

Patient information factsheet

Headache

More than 10 million people in the UK get headaches regularly, making them one of the most common health complaints. But most aren't serious and are easily treated.

Headaches are pains that occur in any region of the head. They can occur on both sides of the head or be isolated to a certain location. In many cases, you can treat headaches at home with over-the-counter painkillers and lifestyle changes, such as getting more rest and drinking enough fluids. However, it's a good idea to see your GP if your headaches aren't relieved by over-the-counter treatments, or if they're so painful or frequent that they affect your daily activities or are causing you to miss work. Some of the main types of headaches and their common causes are described below.

Tension headaches

Tension headaches are the most common type of headache and are what we think of as normal, "everyday" headaches. They feel like a constant ache that affects both sides of the head, as though a tight band is stretched around it. A tension headache normally won't be severe enough to prevent you doing everyday activities. They usually last for 30 minutes to several hours, but can last for several days. The exact cause is unclear, but tension headaches have been linked to things such as stress, poor posture, skipping meals and dehydration. Tension headaches can usually be treated with ordinary painkillers such as paracetamol and ibuprofen. Lifestyle changes, such as getting regular sleep, reducing stress and staying well hydrated, may also help.

Migraines

Migraines are less common than tension headaches. They're usually felt as a severe, throbbing pain at the front or side of the head. Some people also have other symptoms, such as nausea or vomiting (feeling or being sick) and increased sensitivity to light or sound. Migraines tend to be more severe than tension headaches and can stop you carrying out your normal daily activities. They usually last at least a couple of hours, and some people find they need to stay in bed for days at a time.

Cluster headaches

Cluster headaches are a rare type of headache that occur in clusters for a month or two at a time around the same time of year. They're very painful, causing intense pain around one eye, and often occur with other symptoms, such as a watering or red eye and a blocked or runny nose.

Painkillers

Many people who have migraines find that over-the-counter painkillers, such as paracetamol, aspirin and ibuprofen, can help to reduce their symptoms. They tend to be most effective if taken at the first signs of a migraine attack, as this gives them time to absorb into your bloodstream and ease your symptoms. It is not advisable to wait until the headache worsens before taking painkillers because by this point it is often too late for the medication to work. Soluble painkillers (tablets that dissolve in a glass of water) are a good alternative because they are absorbed quickly by your body.

If you cannot swallow painkillers because of nausea or vomiting, suppositories may be a better option. These are capsules that are inserted into the anus (back passage).

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Self care

There are a number of steps that can reduce the risk of headaches and ease the pain of headaches that do arise:

- Apply a heat pack or ice pack to your head or neck (avoid extreme temperatures)
- Avoid stress where possible, and develop healthy coping strategies for unavoidable stress
- Eat regular meals
- Exercise regularly
- Get enough rest and regular sleep

Treatment for headaches

The most common methods recommended for treating headaches are rest and over-the-counter pain relief medication.

In some cases, healthcare providers may prescribe preventative medication, such as tricyclic antidepressants, anti-epileptic drugs and beta blockers. A lumbar puncture procedure (taking a small sample of fluid from the spine) may be needed in order to rule out the minor possibility of bleeding on the surface of the brain (a subarachnoid haemorrhage or SAH).

Who to contact if you are concerned

If you have any concerns about your symptoms you should contact your GP or call 111 for advice.

Useful links

www.nhs.uk/conditions/headache/Pages/Introduction.aspx

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Migraine/Pages/Introduction.aspx

Have your say

We would be very grateful if you would complete a feedback card before you leave. It's your chance to have your say on the treatment you, or a family member have received in hospital and helps us continually improve the service we give to our patients.

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