

Headaches



BY LISA J. HUNT, D.O.

Headaches have multiple causes and occur in just about everyone at some point in their lives. A headache is defined as a pain in the head or upper neck. These are the most common locations of pain and causes include muscle tension, anxiety, allergies, eyestrain, hunger, sinus infection, hormonal imbalances, TMJ syndrome, head trauma, nutritional deficiencies and exposure to irritants (i.e. pollutants, perfume). Headaches can also be a sign of an underlying health problem. For example, people who suffer from frequent headaches may be reacting to certain foods and food additives, such as wheat, chocolate, MSG, sugar, sulfites, dairy products, nuts and alcohol. Other possible contributing health issues include anemia, bowel problems, high blood pressure, hypoglycemia, spine misalignment, dehydration, vitamin B deficiency, and diseases of the eye, nose or throat. Rarely, they can be caused by benign or malignant tumors or blood vessel abnormalities such as aneurysms, or bleeds. Due to the number of people suffering from headaches and the difficulties in treatment, the International Headache Society agreed in 2007 on an updated classification system for headaches, with three major categories: (1) primary headaches (2) secondary headaches and (3) cranial neuralgias, facial pain and other headaches.

Primary Headaches

Primary headaches include migraine, tension headaches and cluster headaches. Headache experts estimate that about 90 percent of all headaches are tension headaches, which are more common among women and caused by muscular tension. The etiology of tension headaches remains unknown. However, it is believed to be most likely due to contraction of the muscles that cover the skull. When the muscles covering the skull are stressed, they may spasm and therefore cause pain. Migraines are the second most common type of primary headache and result from changes in the blood vessels in the brain. It is estimated that 28 million people in the United States (approximately 12 % of the population) suffer from migraine headaches. Migraines can affect children as well as adults. Prior to puberty, males and females are affected equally by migraines. After puberty however, women are affected more than men. Lastly, cluster headaches are a rare type of primary headache affecting 0.1% of the population (1 in 1000 people). They are severe, recurring headaches that strike about 1 million Americans and are considered to be one of the most painful types of headache. This type of headache primarily affects men in their late twenties and is caused when a nerve pathway in the base of the brain (the trigeminal nerve pathway) is activated. The trigeminal nerve is the main nerve of the face and is responsible for sensations such as pain. When activated, the trigeminal nerve causes eye pain associated with cluster headaches. Primary headaches can affect the quality of life. Some people have occasional headaches that resolve quickly, while others are debilitating. Though this type of headache is usually not life-threatening, it may be associated with symptoms that can mimic strokes or intracerebral bleeding.

Secondary Headaches

Secondary headaches are those which are caused by underlying structural problems in the head or neck. There are many possible etiologies including bleeding in the brain, tumors and meningitis, to name a few. Secondary headaches are classified by their etiology and not their symptoms. The main causes are head or neck trauma such as whiplash injury and intracranial hematoma. Headaches caused by brain or neck vascular disorders such as ischemic stroke, transient ischemic attack (TIA), or vascular malformations are also defined as secondary headaches. In addition, headaches caused by high blood pressure, hypothyroidism, fasting, or injury to facial structures including teeth, jaws or TMJ, and psychiatric disorders are also classified as secondary headaches.

Cranial Neuralgias, Facial Pain and Other Headaches

Neuralgia is defined as nerve pain. Cranial neuralgia describes a group of headaches which occur because the nerves in the upper neck and head become inflamed and therefore become the source of head pain. This category contains all the headaches that cannot be classified.

Treatment

One should always seek and treat the cause of the headache and not the symptom. In order to help prevent headaches, eat a well-balanced diet, including protein, with every meal. It is also suggested to eat five small meals to help stabilize wide blood sugar swings. One should try eliminating foods containing tyramine (i.e. alcoholic beverages, bananas, chocolate, and vinegar), the amino acid phenylalanine (found in aspartame → sold as Equal, NutraSweet), monosodium glutamate (MSG), and nitrites (preservatives found in hot dogs and luncheon meats). Long-term overuse of NSAID's (Motrin, Advil,

Aleve, etc.), aspirin, acetaminophen and other nonprescription painkillers can make chronic headaches worse by interfering with the brain's natural ability to fight headaches. If a headache does not subside, or progressively worsens over the course of a week, one should consult a physician, as this can be a sign of a serious underlying organic problem such as a tumor. It is also important to get sufficient sleep. Deep breathing exercises can be helpful in prevention as well, since a lack of oxygen can cause headaches. Good posture is also essential in headache prevention. Regular exercise can help prevent headaches caused by tension and may also reduce the frequency and severity of migraines. Note, however, that headaches with organic causes can be made worse by exercise. If one suffers from more than an occasional tension headache, keeping a headache log (recording each headache's description of pain, severity, location and duration) can be very helpful for your health care provider in diagnosing your condition.

The FDA has approved both over-the-counter and prescription medications for treatment and prevention of specific types of headaches. If these become necessary, one should check with one's health professional for appropriate recommendations. Lastly, if any of the following symptoms accompany a headache, one should consult one's health care provider: blurred or vision change, confusion or loss of speech, fever, neck stiffness, light sensitivity, pressure behind the eyes relieved by vomiting, pressure in the sinuses, throbbing of the head and temple areas, pounding heartbeat, and a feeling as though your head will explode. ^S_M