

“When the head aches, all the members partake of the pain.”

Miguel de Cervantes,
Don Quixote

head off headaches

Headaches are a real pain in the you-know-where. At the first throb, learn which kind you have and easy ways to feel better fast.

FOR SOME PEOPLE, a headache is an ever ready excuse to avoid undesirable chores and social occasions. (“I’m so sorry, hon. Give my best to your great-aunt Ida.”) But with 45 million Americans reporting that they suffer from chronic headaches (ones that recur frequently or in a pattern), the affliction is no easy out, says Lisa Mannix, a neurologist in Cincinnati

and a spokesperson for the National Headache Foundation. Fortunately, there is a treatment for every type of headache, though not all headaches respond to the same remedies. Read on to figure out which kind of headache you get and how to hit the pain where it hurts. Whether you like it or not, you may be able to visit with those relatives after all.

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tension headache

This type of headache feels like a dull ache on both sides of the head (like a tightening band) and causes mild to moderate discomfort, which means you can usually keep up your normal activities.

HOW LONG IT LASTS AND FREQUENCY: From 30 minutes to several days. Chronic tension headaches occur often (15 or more days a month) for more than three months.

WHO GETS THEM: Almost everyone. They are the most common type of headache. Up to 78 percent of adults have them at some point in their lives. But women are more likely than men to suffer from them chronically.

USUALLY TRIGGERED BY: Not having your morning cup when you're used to it or too much caffeine. Brain strain (that is, the mental or emotional stress of a tough day) or muscle tension in the head, the neck, and the shoulders.

OTHER TRIGGERS: Hunger, lack of sleep, and changes in sleep patterns, like dozing late on the weekends.

HOW TO TREAT WITHOUT MEDICATION:

- Get enough rest, but keep the same bedtime and waking hours all week long—not just on weekdays.

- Ice sore muscles in your neck and shoulders (to help reduce inflammation), or treat yourself to a massage. Even a few minutes of self-kneading can help reduce tension.

- If you've skipped a meal, eat something. Choose a food with naturally occurring sugar that is digested quickly (like fruit) and something with a bit of protein (cheese or nuts), to steady blood-sugar levels.

HOW TO TREAT WITH MEDICATION:

- Most tension headaches respond to the recommended dose of an over-the-counter drug, such as ibuprofen (Advil), acetaminophen (Tylenol), or naproxen sodium (Aleve).

- Extra Strength Excedrin, which is a combination of acetaminophen, aspirin, and caffeine, works for some people (the caffeine helps increase the absorption of the acetaminophen and the aspirin). However, because too much caffeine over time can cause nausea and make headaches even worse, you should not take this product more than a few times a week.

- Doctors sometimes offer chronic sufferers a low dose of antidepressants as preventive medicine. These are thought to alter brain chemicals that affect pain perception, says Mannix.

migraine headache

A throbbing or steady pain, this kind of headache occurs on one or both sides of the head and is moderate to severe in intensity. About 50 to 70 percent of sufferers get a *prodrome*, one or more warning signs that occur several days or hours before the pain begins. Symptoms can include fatigue, muscle pain in the neck and the shoulders, food cravings, yawning, and difficulty concentrating. About 15 percent of people also get an *aura* (tunnel vision, flashing, or blind spots); numbness or tingling in body parts; and dizziness, which may come on about an hour before the headache and disappear once the pain starts, says Roger Cady, M.D., a headache specialist in Springfield, Missouri. Once the pain begins, some people feel nauseated, have difficulty thinking, and are sensitive to light and sound. And because some of the nerves affected by migraines cross the sinuses, a sufferer might feel congested or have teary eyes.

the craziest cures

A few bizarre headache remedies from the past that have mostly run their course (thank goodness!).

■ **A hole in the head.**

In ancient times, drilling a hole in the skull of a live person was thought to evict evil, headache-causing spirits. One tribe in western Kenya continues this practice.

■ **Slimy sea creatures.**

The early Romans applied a species of electric fish to a person's head to "shock away" the headache. Leeches were also applied inside the nostrils to draw out pain and toxins.

■ **Poisons.** Treatments in the 1800s included arsenic, turpentine, and quinine. Neurologist Sir William Gowers peddled Gowers mixture—a powerful combination of nitroglycerin, alcohol, and other agents.

HOW LONG IT LASTS AND FREQUENCY: From hours to several days. Chronic migraines can occur anywhere from a few times a year to every other day.

WHO GETS THEM: About one in four women of reproductive age, says Cady. Migraines are the second most common type of headache, affecting 30 million Americans (mostly women), though nearly half remain undiagnosed.

USUALLY TRIGGERED BY:

- An intense, stimulating environment, with lots of noise and flashing lights (a loud bar or a concert); stress; lack of sleep; or caffeine excess or withdrawal. These things hyperstimulate the central nervous system and a key nerve in the brain stem. The result is an overfiring of pain signals.
- Genetics. If one of or both your parents suffer from migraines, chances are you will, too.
- Certain foods or smells. Drinking wine, eating cheese or chocolate, or exposure to smoke or perfume can set off an attack.
- A drop in estrogen. "Sixty percent of women who get migraines get the kind that come around their periods," says Cady. When levels of estrogen fall, right before the menstrual cycle begins, migraines can become more likely and intense.

HOW TO TREAT WITHOUT MEDICATION:

- Rest. Simply sleeping off a migraine is effective for many sufferers, and escaping to a quiet, dark room can also be helpful.
- Biofeedback. Since climbing into bed isn't always possible, many sufferers try to prevent migraines with biofeedback, a relaxation technique that helps you tune in to your body processes, such as heart rate and blood pressure. "Daily biofeedback can help slow down the brain's activity and can be as effective as preventive medication for some," says Cady. Practicing it for a few minutes a day (even on days you don't have a headache) can change your brain's rapid beta waves to slower, calmer alpha waves, raising your threshold for stimulation. Cady suggests ordering an instructional biofeedback kit (\$10, www.headachecare.com).
- Daily nutritional supplements. Some research has shown that taking B vitamins, as well as 200 to 500 milligrams of magnesium, can help cut down on electrical misfirings in the brain.

special head cases

Unexpected things can cause headaches. Below, three odd causes.

1. Ice cream. "Brain freeze" occurs when cold food touches the roof of your mouth, possibly altering blood flow in the brain or causing pain on a major nerve. This sends pain signals, which usually last less than a minute, throughout the face.

2. Sex. It's unusual, but sexual activity, especially orgasm, can trigger severe head pain. This is usually nothing to worry about, but see a doctor if the pain recurs.

3. A growing problem. Secondary headaches—those caused by a tumor or an aneurysm—are rare. If you're over the age of 50 and your headaches are new or worsen over time, see a doctor.

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If you're prone to tension headaches, try to stay loose and limber, especially in the shoulders and the neck.

HOW TO TREAT WITH MEDICATION:

- If the migraines are mild, they can be treated with the same drugs that work for tension headaches. "The key is to take the pill at the first sign of pain and stop the nervous system from being bombarded with pain signals," says Cady. But beware: Overuse can cause rebound headaches. "The medications can change the brain receptors, so when the drugs wear off, another headache can follow," says Mannix. If you're taking over-the-counter meds more than one or two days a week, see a doctor to discuss alternatives.
- More severe headaches may require a prescription. Drugs called triptans, such as Imitrex, Maxalt, and Zomig, have few side effects and treat both the headache pain and the accompanying nausea, vertigo, and photophobia (sensitivity to light). For extreme migraine pain, your doctor might prescribe an injectable form of Imitrex, which kicks in almost immediately.
- Taking a preventive medication can also help. Ones that work include antiseizure medications (like Topamax and Depakote), antidepressants, and beta-blockers, such as propranolol (Inderal) and nadolol (Corgard), which help decrease high blood pressure and heart rate.

sinus headache

This variety of headache causes mild to severe pain and pressure around the sinuses, the air-filled cavities located throughout the face. Because some of the same nerves activated in a migraine are activated in a sinus headache, the two can feel similar. You might have a sinus headache if you have a yellow or green nasal discharge. With a migraine, nasal fluids tend to be clear.

HOW LONG IT LASTS AND FREQUENCY: A sinus headache can subside or last until the infection that caused it has been treated and the mucus has drained. Infections might clear up on their own, but treatment will probably speed recovery and lessen the severity of the headache, says Jordan Josephson, an otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat specialist) and the author of *Sinus Relief Now* (Perigee Trade, \$16). Sinus headaches can recur, but they don't follow a pattern.

tip Keep a headache diary. Note when the pain struck, what medications you took, and how much sleep you got the night before.

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WHO GETS THEM: People with allergies and frequent travelers are the most susceptible to the infections. (Airplane air is unventilated and shared, so travelers are more likely to pick up bacteria or a virus.)

USUALLY CAUSED BY: Bacteria or a virus that leads to infection and inflames the area. It's a vicious cycle: When healthy sinuses become clogged and cannot drain, they can harbor bacteria or a virus, which leads to pressure and congestion. That congestion then makes the sinuses more prone to infection. Structural problems, such as a deviated septum (which can block the flow of air), increase the chance of infecting the sinuses.

HOW TO TREAT WITHOUT MEDICATION:

■ Daily use of over-the-counter saline nasal products helps rinse out pollutants, allergens, and germs that could start a future infection, says Josephson.

■ In the wintertime, a humidifier will help keep sinus membranes moist. (Dry air can cause mucus to dry and crust, which can lead to bleeding and infection.) But be sure to keep the humidifier clean, and don't use the machine in warm or humid weather, when it can increase the amount of mold in the air, possibly exacerbating a sinus infection and headache.

HOW TO TREAT WITH MEDICATION:

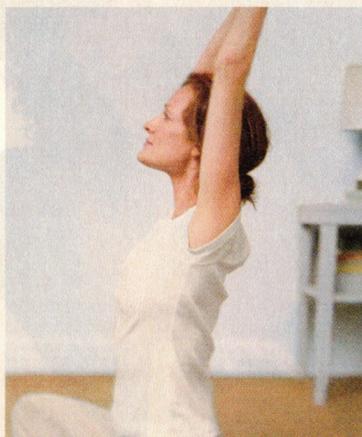
■ If you think you have a sinus headache, see an otolaryngologist for a proper diagnosis. She may recommend a pain reliever and a decongestant to help speed mucus drainage.

■ If you have allergies, consider a daily over-the-counter antihistamine to help reduce the sinus-membrane swelling.

■ Your doctor might run tests to determine whether you have a bacterial infection, which is treated with antibiotics, or a viral infection, which, like a cold, may respond to home remedies, such as resting and drinking warm fluids.

■ As a maintenance strategy, your doctor might recommend a steroid spray, like Nasonex or NascortAQ, to keep membrane swelling to a minimum.

■ Surgery is a last resort for people who suffer from recurrent sinus infections or have a structural blockage.



When you feel a headache coming, a few minutes of stress-relieving stretching can help ease the pain.



Get more
headache info

Clusters, an unexplained type of headache, afflict mostly men. To learn more, go to www.realsimple.com/clusterheadaches.

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