

HEADACHES

CAN THEY BE PREVENTED?

Unfortunately, there is no cure for most primary headache conditions; secondary headaches may be cured if the condition causing them is curable (e.g. sinus headache, benign tumor). Below are some preventive steps for primary headache conditions.

STRESS Headaches

Since stress is high on the list of headache causes and migraine triggers, stress management techniques are high on the list of headache prevention strategies. These include massage, meditation, biofeedback, and having a positive attitude.

Lifestyle modifications can also help: don't smoke, try to eat meals regularly; avoid dietary triggers; get plenty of rest and exercise.

MIGRAINE Headaches

Specific steps to prevent migraines:

Figure out what triggers your migraines and then avoid those triggers as much as possible. These include:

- Foods (e.g. chocolate, smoked fish, nuts, pickled foods or aged cheese)
- Beverages (e.g. red wine, other alcoholic beverages; caffeine withdrawal)
- Food additives (e.g. nitrates, nitrites or MSG)
- Environmental factors (e.g. bright or flashing lights; changes in weather; increased stress; missed meals; changes in altitude)
- Significant changes in sleep (either too much or too little)
- Hormonal changes: especially changes in estrogen levels (e.g. with pregnancy, premenstrual syndrome and peri-menopause)

- Medications: starting or stopping many medications may increase or decrease migraine incidence (e.g. birth control pills, hormone replacement therapy, certain antidepressants, certain blood pressure medications). This is another reason never to stop taking a chronic medicine suddenly without first discussing it with your physician.

For patients who get frequent migraines or cluster headaches and for whom lifestyle changes do not bring sufficient relief, preventive prescription medicines are available.

These medicines are prescribed to reduce the frequency and severity of attacks in patients who have more than two migraines per month, who have disabling migraines monthly, or chronic recurrent clusters. In general, these drugs act to prevent blood-vessel swelling; they don't treat the migraine-associated symptoms and most won't help a migraine or cluster headache once it has started. Your doctor may recommend one of many medicines from the following categories:

- Beta-blockers (e.g. propranolol)
- Antidepressants (e.g. Elavil or Zoloft)
- Calcium channel blockers
- Methysergide
- Verapamil
- Prednisone
- Ergotamine tartrate
- Lithium carbonate
- Divalproex Sodium
- Histamine acid phosphate

TENSION Headaches

Specific steps to preventing tension headaches:

For sufferers of tension headaches, the list of preventive strategies involves all the strategies to reduce stress, from exercise to meditation to yoga to massage. Figure out what works best for you, then just do it. Getting sufficient and regular sleep should also help as will eating a well-balanced diet. Treatment for tension-type headache may include over-the-counter or prescription medications, as well as self-help techniques, such as relaxation training.

SINUS Headaches

Tension-type headaches occur randomly and are often the result of temporary stress, anxiety, fatigue, or anger. Symptoms include soreness in your temples, a tightening band-like sensation around your head (a "vice-like" ache), a pulling feeling, pressure sensations, and contracting head and neck muscles. The headache begins in your forehead, temples, or the back of your head and neck. If your headache is truly caused by a sinus blockage, such as an infection, you will probably have a fever. An x-ray will confirm a sinus blockage. Your physician's treatment might include antibiotics for the infection, as well as antihistamines or decongestants.

CLUSTER Headaches

Cluster headache gets its name because the attacks come in groups. The pain arrives with little, if any, warning and is usually on one side of the head. A tearing or bloodshot eye and a runny nose on the side of the headache may also accompany the pain. Cluster headache, believed to be caused by chemical reactions in the brain, has been described as the most severe and intense of any headache type. Treatment for cluster headache includes prescription medication and oxygen.

SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP

When seeking treatment for your headache, start with your primary care physician. Discuss his or her experience and approach to headaches, including methods of classification, diagnosis, and treatment. Your doctor may decide to recommend you to a headache specialist, depending upon your symptoms or other physical conditions (diabetes, allergies, etc.) that require a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to your headache.

This newsletter is for information purposes only and is not a statement of benefits.

June is also SUN SAFETY Month

The best sun protection is provided when all the sun-safe behaviors are practiced together:

1. Limit sun exposure during the hours when the sun's rays are the strongest, 10am to 4pm. If your shadow is shorter than you are, the sun is at its highest intensity. Shadow Rule: No Shadow-SEEK SHADE.
2. Limit exposure to the reflective surfaces like snow and water. UV rays can be reflected off of sand, tile, water, snow, and buildings. It is important to practice all the sun protective behaviors even when you are in the shade.
3. Use broad-spectrum sunscreens whose active ingredients block UVA and UVB rays. The Sun Protective Factor (SPF) should be a minimum of 15. Sunscreens should be used every day, including cloudy days. They should be applied liberally and evenly before going out into the sun and should be applied frequently, especially after swimming.
4. Seek shade whenever possible. Shade structures such as trees and umbrellas provide year round protection. Although trees do not offer complete sun protection, they provide about 60 percent blockage from the sun's rays.
5. Wear a wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses, and long-sleeved, tightly woven clothing. Clothing can physically block out the sun's harmful rays and should be one of the first lines of defense against sun exposure. Sunglasses should block out 100 percent of UVA and UVB radiation to protect the eyes from damage.

Want to Learn More?

Please search the websites below for more information on headaches and their affects on your daily life.

Neurology Channel
www.neurologychannel.com/headaches

Center for Disease Control
www.cdc.gov/nasd

WEB MD
webmd.com

Sources: headache.com; cdc.gov; webmd.com

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