

A quick guide to headaches

Headaches are very common. They are a major reason people miss work or school. There are many things you can do to help prevent and treat headaches.

There are many different causes of headache. They can be triggered by stress, the way you sit or move, hunger, thirst, tiredness, hormonal changes and overuse of medications or alcohol. You can also get headaches when you have an infection like the flu or an allergic reaction, or if you've pulled a muscle in your neck or had a bang to the head.

People often worry their headache is caused by something serious like a brain tumour or blood clot. It can be reassuring to know these are very rare. Usually headaches go away given time, rest and/or treatment with pain relief medicine.



How can I describe my headaches?

To know what type of headache you have, it is helpful to describe it well. Try these questions:

- Where is the pain? Is it on one side or both, behind your eye(s), forehead?
- How severe are they on a scale of one (not very painful) to 10 (severe)?
- What do they feel like? Are they vice-like, stabbing, throbbing, splitting?
- How often do they happen and how long do they last?
- When do they happen?
- Does the pain develop over hours or does it begin suddenly?
- Does anything seem to trigger them or make them worse? This could be some foods, alcohol, caffeine, noise, bright light, hunger, stress, tiredness.
- What treatment do you take? How well does the treatment work?

Common types of headaches

There are many types of headaches. Understanding what type of headache you have can help you find the best way to prevent and treat it.

<p>Tension headache <i>Feels like a tight band around your head.</i></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most common type of headache. • May begin with shoulder or neck tension. • Often caused by lifestyle issues such as poor posture, not getting enough sleep and stress or anxiety. • Treatment of lifestyle factors can help improve or prevent headaches.
<p>Migraine <i>Intense, throbbing pain, usually one-sided.</i></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can make you feel weak and exhausted. • May also cause nausea, vomiting and sensitivity to light and noise. • Tends to run in families. Is common in children, teenagers and young adults but may begin at any age. • Treatment includes lifestyle changes and using medications for relief or, in some cases, to stop a migraine from happening.
<p>Cluster headache <i>Sudden, stabbing pain, often around your eye.</i></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is severe but uncommon. • Lasts from 15 minutes to three hours, goes away and then comes back. • May be associated with symptoms of the eye, nose or face on the same side (e.g., tearing of the eye). • Can happen several times a day for a period, then disappear for months or years. • Sometimes triggered by drinking alcohol.
<p>Medication-overuse headache <i>May feel like a tension-type headache or migraine-like attack.</i></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overuse of pain relief medications to treat headaches can lead to rebound headaches. • Often improve within two months of stopping the overused medicine. • Can feel worse before they feel better. • To avoid, use pain relief for the shortest possible time, only when you have pain. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Paracetamol and ibuprofen should not be taken for headache on more than 15 days per month. ○ Triptans for migraine should not be used for more than 10 days per month.

What can I do if I have a headache?

Medication-free ways for managing headaches

- Drink a large glass of water.
- Rest in a dark, quiet room.
- Have someone give you a head, neck and shoulder massage.
- Relax in a warm bath.



Medications for headache

- Paracetamol, aspirin or ibuprofen are simple pain relievers that can ease occasional tension headaches.
- Taken soon enough, they can also help stop migraines. If they don't help, your doctor may prescribe a triptan or other medicine to help relieve migraine symptoms.
- Using pain relievers occasionally is okay, but they are not a good solution for chronic headache pain. Regular use of pain relievers can cause rebound (analgesic overuse) headaches.
- If you get headaches three or more times a month, your doctor may suggest a treatment to help prevent them.

What can I do to prevent headaches?

Prevent headaches

Get enough sleep
Try to get to bed at the same time every night and allow yourself an hour to wind down before doing so.

Exercise regularly
Aim to get your heart rate up at least three times a week.

Drink lots of water
To stay hydrated.

Don't skip meals
Keep your blood-sugar levels even by eating small amounts of healthy food regularly.

Good posture
Avoid muscle pain and tension by using good posture while at the computer and taking regular breaks from the screen.

Manage stress
Make time in your day to do something you find relaxing. Sauna, tai chi, yoga, meditation and mindfulness have been shown to help.

You should see your doctor if:

- your headaches don't go away, or they get worse
- you take pain relief medicine and it doesn't help
- you take pain relief medication more than twice a week
- you were headache-free but now get them
- your headache is triggered by standing up, coughing, straining or having sex
- you are over 50 and start to get regular headaches or face or jaw pain.

Call Healthline 0800 611 116 if you are unsure what you should do.



When to seek urgent medical care

Unless you know from experience that it is a migraine, get a headache checked right away if you have ANY of the following symptoms:

- a severe headache that comes on suddenly and gets worse within minutes
- nausea, a stiff neck, rash, fever, shaking or sensitivity to light
- a red eye with nausea or vomiting
- sudden limpness on one side of your body, slurred or strange speech and confusion.

For any of the above symptoms call Healthline 0800 611 116 straight away for advice and support. They will call an ambulance for you if needed.

Need more help?

To read more about headaches and what you can do about them, visit www.healthnavigator.org.nz/headache/