



### What causes headaches?

Most headaches are caused by tension and can be treated with self-care. Other possible causes of headaches are infections, allergy, hunger, changes in blood flow in vessels of the head or response to chemicals.

#### ❖ Tension headaches

About 90% of all headaches can be classified as tension headaches (*muscle contraction headaches*). These headaches are usually described as a dull, tight feeling in the head, but the pain can also involve the neck, shoulder, jaw and upper back. These headaches are usually caused by tension in the muscles of the head, neck, forehead, and temples. The muscle tension may be a result of either emotional stress or physical stress or both.

#### ❖ Migraine headaches

Many people consider any bad headache a migraine, but migraine headaches have very specific symptoms. They include throbbing pain on one or both sides of the head, sensitivity to light or noise, and nausea. Attacks can last for several hours and, in some cases, linger for days. These headaches can be triggered by certain foods or food additives. Most people first begin experiencing migraine headaches during their teens and early 20's. What causes migraine headaches is not yet known. Current thinking is that a combination of genetic factors, changes in electrical activity and blood flow in the brain and head, hormones, and environmental factors trigger migraines. Some people with migraine headaches have warning symptoms before the onset of the headache. This is called an *aura*. These warning signs

includes blind spots, flashing lights, numbness of the arms, unusual smells, dizziness, and nausea.

#### ❖ Cluster headaches

Cluster headaches are not as common as migraine headaches and affect less than 1% of the population. The most common symptom of a cluster headache is an explosive pain usually occurring around one eye, the temples, or the forehead. This type of headache appears daily for weeks or months in groups, or *clusters*. In between these clusters, the cluster headache sufferer may be free of pain for months or years. Cluster headaches are more common in men than women. The severe pain of the cluster headache may trigger feelings of desperation and isolation. Most cluster headaches can be successfully treated. Cluster headaches may be triggered by tobacco smoke and alcohol.

### Headache treatments

#### ❖ Taking medications

The treatment for *tension* and *cluster* headaches can include over-the-counter medications (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications or NSAIDS) like aspirin or ibuprofen and some prescription medications like Fioricet.

The treatment for *migraine* headaches includes over-the-counter NSAIDS like aspirin and ibuprofen, drugs containing ergotamine (which affect the blood vessels) like migronal/DHE, and triptans like sumatriptan (Imitrex®) and zolmitriptan (Zomig®).

If you take headache medication, do not overuse these pain relievers. Overuse can actually result in a worse

headache, called a *rebound headache*. Both over-the-counter and prescribed headache medications can cause this problem if they are not taken carefully. Be sure to follow your doctor's directions.

#### ❖ Eating well

By tracking when your headache occurs, you may begin to note specific foods that trigger your headache. Migraines often respond to changes in diet. Not only can specific foods trigger a headache, but also dietary habits can play a role. Fasting, for instance, may bring on headaches in some people. Some of the most common headache foods include:

- alcohol (especially red wine)
- aged cheeses (e.g. cheddar, parmesan)
- chocolate
- nitrites
- MSG or monosodium glutamate
- caffeine
- aspartame
- tobacco smoke

#### ❖ Using physical activity

As with diet, physical activity is a simple and natural way to improve your overall health and reduce your stress. Regular daily exercise and stretching can prevent headaches by decreasing stress and tension. There are many types of exercise, and it is best to experiment until you find physical activities that you enjoy and that suit your lifestyle. Be sure to get a thorough medical checkup before making any drastic changes in your physical activity level.

#### ❖ Managing your stress

Many people with headaches are able to decrease how often their headaches occur by learning to relax and manage stress. Skills such as slow deep breathing, meditation, and guided imagery can help with pain management. Talk with your medical professional for assistance with stress management, log onto [kp.org](http://kp.org), or contact your Health Education Center or Department.

#### ❖ Considering biofeedback

There is some evidence that biofeedback can be helpful in managing migraine headaches. It has not been shown to be helpful with other types of headaches. Biofeedback is a therapeutic tool that measures your physiological processes like temperature, breathing rate, muscle tension and heart rate. Monitoring these processes can help you learn how to achieve a specific level of relaxation. It requires home practice between office visits. For more information about biofeedback, talk with your doctor or other health care professional.

### Migraines and women

Migraines occur more often in women than in men. Certain hormonal changes during puberty in girls that remain throughout adulthood are thought to influence migraine headache attacks in women. Individual differences exist: attacks may occur several days before, during, or immediately after a woman's menstrual period. Oral contraceptives may also affect the

incidence of migraine attacks. Some women find their migraine attacks worsen while they are on birth control pills. Also, some women using hormone replacement therapy (HRT) after hysterectomy or menopause develop migraine headaches. Please discuss using birth control pills or hormone replacement therapy (HRT) with your medical professional. Pregnancy also influences migraines. Many women with migraines find their attacks disappear completely, occur less often, or are milder during pregnancy.

### Call Kaiser Permanente if a headache . . .

- is accompanied by confusion, unconsciousness, or convulsions
- involves pain in the eye or ear
- is accompanied by fever
- is accompanied by nausea or vomiting
- occurs after a blow to the head
- is persistent in someone previously free of headaches
- is recurrent, especially in children
- interferes with normal life

#### Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org) to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand names; any similar products may be used.