



KAISER PERMANENTE®

Headaches

A headache is a painful feeling affecting one or more specific locations in the head. More than 80 percent of headaches are caused by tension, which may make the muscles of the head, neck, back, and shoulders tighten. Other causes include infections, allergies, injuries, hunger, exposure to chemicals, or menstrual periods. A migraine headache is a specific type of headache and is believed to be caused by changes in the flow of blood in the vessels of the head. Symptoms of a migraine include throbbing pain on one or both sides of the head and sensitivity to light and noise, sometimes accompanied by nausea or vomiting.

It should be noted that headaches are rarely due to eye strain, bad eyeglasses, or sinus trouble. Also, it is very rare that headaches are due to brain tumors or serious problems within the head.

The tension that causes so many headaches can result from both emotional stress and physical stress, such as sitting too long at a computer. Here are four tips for reducing these two kinds of stress:

- 1.) Try to relax both before and after you do something that is emotionally stressful—especially if this activity has caused headaches for you before.
- 2.) If you work at a desk, evaluate your neck and shoulder posture and adjust it for proper alignment. Also, change positions often during the day and make a conscious effort to relax your jaw, neck, and shoulder muscles.
- 3.) Maintain a regular exercise program to relieve both physical and emotional tension.
- 4.) Cut down on caffeine. People who drink a lot of caffeine often get headaches several hours after they've had their last cup of coffee, or may wake up with a headache.

If you get a headache, stop what you're doing and rest quietly for a few minutes. Do some stretches or a relaxation exercise. Try massaging your neck muscles or ask someone else for a massage. You might also lie down in a dark room with a cool cloth on the painful area. The sooner you start these simple treatments, the better your chance of stopping the headache.

Of course, many people find that taking aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen can relieve the pain of headaches. However, don't take them more often than one or two days a week. Recent research has shown that taking too many pain relievers can make headaches more frequent or more severe. This is true for both over-the-counter pain relievers and for prescription pain relievers. Also, never give aspirin to children or teens under the age of 20. If you're diagnosed with migraine headaches, you may need prescribed medications.

If these steps don't make your headache better and the pain remains intense, call your health care professional. You should also call if you develop a fever of 103 degrees or higher along with the headache, if you experience headaches more than three times a week over a period of time, or if headaches wake you up out of a sound sleep or are particularly bad first thing in the morning. You should seek immediate help if your headache is severe and feels very different from previous headaches; if it occurs with a stiff neck, fever, nausea or vomiting; if it's accompanied by one-sided weakness, numbness, speech, or vision problems; or if it comes on after you've received a blow to the head and is accompanied by other symptoms, such as confusion or vomiting.



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- Check your Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook
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To get your free Handbook and Healthphone Directory, call 1-800-464-4000.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor or other health care professional.

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REGIONAL HEALTH EDUCATION