

# Headache

There are different types of headache and many different causes. Most people get headaches sometimes, but some people get headaches more often. A headache can be a symptom of a serious illness. Doctors and pharmacists can help find the cause of a headache and advise you on treatment.

## Some common headaches

It is possible to have more than one type of headache at the same time.

### Tension-type headache

Tension-type headache is the most common headache. Most tension headaches cause constant (not throbbing) pain on both sides of the head. The pain often feels like a heavy or tight band around your head. It may also affect your neck. A tension-type headache may last from 30 minutes to several days.

### Migraine

A migraine is a severe headache that usually throbs. It often occurs on one side of the head, but can spread to both sides. You may also get other symptoms like nausea, vomiting and sensitivity to light, noise and smell. Some people get an aura (e.g. flashing lights, blurred vision, tingling or numbness) up to an hour before the pain starts. A migraine may last from 4 to 72 hours.

### Sinus headache

Sinuses are spaces within the bones of your face that contain air. They can become inflamed and blocked due to allergies, infection and mucus. Blocked sinuses can cause pain and make the area around your eyes, cheeks and forehead feel tender. Only one side of your face may be affected and the pain is often worse when you bend forward or lie down.



## Medicine overuse headache

Using pain-relieving medicines too often for headache can cause 'medicine overuse' headache. You may have a medicine overuse headache if it occurs on more than 15 days a month, and you use pain relievers on more than 10 days a month, for more than three months. Treatment involves stopping the overused medicine. Ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice.

## Headache triggers

Some people find that certain things trigger or cause their headaches. Triggers are not the same for everyone and one person may have different triggers at different times. Different types of headaches usually have different types of triggers.

Triggers for headaches include:

- stress, tension, anxiety, depression
- relaxing after stress (e.g. "weekend migraine")
- allergy (e.g. hayfever)
- hormone changes (e.g. menstruation, pregnancy)
- stopping caffeine (e.g. coffee, tea, cola, chocolate, energy drinks)
- some foods and food additives (e.g. chocolate, citrus fruit, red wine, aged cheese, MSG)
- eating very cold food
- alcohol
- smoke (e.g. cigarettes)
- delaying or missing meals and drinks
- too little or too much sleep
- bright or flickering light
- eye strain

- strong smells or fumes
- noise
- weather, air pressure and altitude changes
- some medicines (e.g. oral contraceptives, HRT, overuse of pain relievers)
- infections and other illnesses
- jaw and teeth problems
- back and neck problems
- poor posture (e.g. tense muscles)
- head injury.

## Self care

- Keep a headache diary to find your headache pattern, possible triggers, helpful treatments and how often you use pain-relieving medicines.
- Try to avoid things that trigger or cause your headaches.
- Reduce stress – plan ahead and let others help you.
- Learn and use techniques to relax your mind and body. Try massages and stretching exercises.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week. Exercise can help relieve stress.
- Get enough sleep.
- Have regular meals and drinks. Eat a healthy diet with a variety of vegetables, fruit, wholegrain foods, nuts and seeds every day. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises not to).

- Limit caffeine drinks.
- Limit alcohol to no more than two standard drinks per day.
- Don't smoke.
- Wear sunglasses to reduce glare.
- Pay attention to your posture. Take regular breaks if you work in the same position all day.

## Medicines

Treatment for headache depends on the cause and type of the headache. There are a number of different medicines used to treat headache. They work in different ways to help different types of headache. Some headache medicines must be prescribed by a doctor, but you can buy others without a doctor's prescription. Ask a pharmacist or doctor about the best medicine for your type of headache.

Medicines for headache include:

- Non-prescription pain relievers (e.g. ibuprofen, paracetamol, aspirin). They can relieve mild to moderate pain in most areas of the body, and often relieve headaches. Soluble products and 'fast-acting' products may give faster relief.
- Prescription medicines that can relieve or prevent migraines.
- Non-prescription decongestants, antihistamines, corticosteroid nose sprays and saline nose rinses that can relieve sinus problems.

## Important

A headache can be a symptom of a serious medical condition. Doctors and pharmacists can help find the type and cause of a headache, and advise on treatment. See a doctor if headaches:

- are not helped by non-prescription pain relievers
- occur on more than 15 days a month
- need pain relievers on more than 10 days a month, for more than three months
- are severe, get worse or occur more often
- start after exercise, sex, straining or coughing
- disturb sleep or are present on waking
- develop while on the oral contraceptive pill or hormone replacement therapy (HRT)
- develop suddenly or are of a new type
- develop after a head injury or an accident
- develop after 50 years of age
- occur with confusion, drowsiness, vomiting, fever, stiff neck, rash, seizures, visual disturbances, weakness, stroke-like symptoms.

**Note:** Children under 16 years should not be given aspirin unless advised by a doctor.

## For more information

### Headache Australia

Phone: 1300 886 660

Website: [www.headacheaustralia.org.au](http://www.headacheaustralia.org.au)

### Manage Pain

Website: [www.managepain.com.au](http://www.managepain.com.au)

### Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthdirect.org.au](http://www.healthdirect.org.au)

### NPS MedicineWise

#### Medicines Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.*

*Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.*

## Related Fact Cards

- » *Alcohol*
- » *Chronic pain*
- » *Hay fever*
- » *Migraine*
- » *Pain relievers*
- » *Relaxation techniques*
- » *Sinus problems*
- » *Sleeping problems*
- » *Vision impairment*

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