



EXPRESS SCRIPTS®



# Headache

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# What causes a headache?

We have all had headaches at certain points in our lives. However, the severity of the headaches and how we feel when we have a headache differs among us. This mostly is due to the fact that we all have different pain thresholds as well as to the different types of headache one can experience.



## So... what are the different types of headaches?

### Tension type headaches

These are the most common type of headaches and present as pain on either both sides of the head or as a band across the forehead. The pain is usually mild to moderate and it is caused by stress/tension, noise, any strain or when you are sick with the cold or flu. The pain usually resolves on its own however, pain relievers can be used to suppress the pain.

### Migraine headaches

Migraine headaches usually occur on one side of the head and the pain is moderate to severe and throbbing. Other symptoms that accompany a migraine headache include:

- Nausea or vomiting
- An aura which is a visual sensation that may appear as flashes of light
- Increased sensitivity to light and sound

Migraine headaches can be triggered by different environmental or physical factors depending on the person. Some triggers include caffeine (having too much or too little compared to what you have normally), certain foods, chemicals such as monosodium glutamate which is found as a preservative in canned foods, changes in weather and many more. The best option is to try to avoid all the triggers that you think are causing the migraine.

### Medications for Tension type headaches and migraines

**Nonprescription therapy** – Tylenol (Acetaminophen), Advil (Ibuprofen) or other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications like Aleve (Naproxen) or Aspirin (Acetylsalicylic acid) can be used to relieve pain.

**Prescription therapy for Migraines** – Triptans such as rizatriptan (Maxalt®), sumatriptan (Imitrex®), etc.) are considered the most efficacious prescription therapy for acute debilitating migraine attacks. They relieve the dilation that causes the headaches. These need to be taken at the first sign of the headache. Consult your doctor or pharmacist for more information.

### Cluster headaches

Cluster headaches present as pain on one side of the face usually around the eye. The pain is described as stabbing and excruciatingly severe. Immediate medical attention must be sought if one is experiencing such type of headache.

### Medication overuse headache

This type of headache is caused by frequent use of analgesics (pain killers) like acetaminophen or ibuprofen as well as long-term use (more than three months) of acute medications used to treat migraines. In order to minimize such headaches, it is important to note how often you are using analgesics. It is also important to taper-down their use to less than 15 days a month for analgesics alone or less than 10 days a month for opioids and combination analgesics or as discussed with your physician.

## Preventing headaches

- Identify what is triggering your headaches and try to avoid them
- Try some relaxation techniques like yoga
- Maintain regular sleeping and eating schedules
- Limit your caffeine intake

## Red Flags – When to see your doctor?

- When you have a stiff neck, blurred vision and reduced consciousness accompanied with the headache
- You start to have headaches in middle age or later (>40 years)
- Headache associated with pain around the eye
- Frequent headaches in children
- Headaches which severely impact quality of life
- If it is the most severe headache you have ever experienced
- When the headache is progressing in severity or increased frequency

### Tips

- Anti-inflammatory pain relievers like Advil and naproxen can cause stomach upset and even lead to bleeding and stomach ulcers if overused.
- Make sure to read the dosing guidelines as well as the maximum recommended daily dose. In any case, do not exceed the maximum recommended daily dose.
- Many other nonprescription cold and flu medications contain pain relievers. Make sure to read the labels carefully to ensure that you are not overdosing on the pain relievers.
- If you are on multiple medications, always consult your pharmacist before getting any pain relievers to alleviate the chances of having a drug interaction.

*Disclaimer: The information found in this brochure is not intended to replace the advice of your pharmacist or physician. If you have any questions specific to your health, please contact your healthcare provider.*

#### References:

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2. Mayo Clinic Staff. Headaches: Treatment depends on your diagnosis and symptoms. Mayo Clinic. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/chronic-daily-headaches/in-depth/headaches/art-20047375>. Published July 28, 2015. Accessed January 19, 2016.
3. Rodriguez D. Headache prevention. Everyday Health. <http://www.everydayhealth.com/headache-migraine/headache-prevention.aspx>. Updated September 14, 2011. Accessed January 19, 2016.