

# Headache

**There are several different types of headache and many different causes. Most people get headaches occasionally, but some people often get headaches. A headache can be a symptom of a serious illness. Doctors and pharmacists can help identify the type and cause of a headache and advise on treatment.**

## Some common headaches

### Tension-type headache

Tension-type headache is the most common type of headache. The pain is usually constant rather than throbbing and is usually felt on both sides of the head. It often feels like a band of heaviness, pressure or tightness around the head and may also affect the neck. A tension-type headache may last from 30 minutes to several days.

### Migraine

A migraine is a severe headache that usually throbs and usually occurs on only one side of the head. There may also be other symptoms such as 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 air-filled spaces within the bones around the nose. Allergy, infection and mucus can cause inflammation and congestion in a sinus. Sinus inflammation or congestion can cause pain and tenderness, usually around the eyes, cheeks or forehead. Only one side of the face may be affected and the pain is often worse when bending forward or lying down.

### Medicine overuse headache

Frequent use of pain relieving medicines for headache and migraine can cause 'medicine overuse' headache. A headache may be a medicine overuse

headache if it occurs on more than 15 days per month, and pain relievers are used on more than 10 days per 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 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
- Relaxation after stress (e.g. "weekend migraine")
- Allergy
- Hormone changes (e.g. menstruation, pregnancy)
- Caffeine (coffee, tea, cola, chocolate, energy drinks) withdrawal
- Certain foods and food additives (e.g. chocolate, citrus fruit, red wine, aged cheese, MSG)
- Eating very cold food
- Alcohol
- Smoke, particularly from 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 dental problems
- Back and neck problems
- Poor posture
- Head trauma.

## Self care

- Keep a headache diary to identify headache pattern, possible triggers, helpful treatments and how often you use pain relieving medicines.
- Avoid headache triggers if possible.
- To reduce stress, plan ahead and let others help you.
- Learn and use relaxation techniques to relax mind and body.
- 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.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grain foods. 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 and alcohol intake.

Follow low-risk drinking guidelines for alcohol.

- 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 and can relieve different types of headache. Ask a doctor or pharmacist about medicines for your headache.

Medicines for headache include:

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

## Important

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

- Are not relieved by non-prescription pain relievers
- Occur on more than 15 days a month
- Need pain relievers more than 10 days a month for more than three months
- Are severe, get worse or become more frequent
- 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
- Are associated 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.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

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

### 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.*

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Always read the label. Use only as directed. Incorrect use could be harmful. If symptoms persist see your healthcare professional.

Your Self Care Pharmacy: