

Headache

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you develop a headache. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

- **Common types of headache** The most common headache is tension-type headache – the one we think of as 'ordinary' or 'everyday' headache. Migraine is a severe throbbing headache at the side or front of the head.
- **Rarer causes of headache** These include overusing pain killers, inflamed blood vessels, or raised pressure inside the head (for example from a bleed or tumour).
- **Headaches are common** As many as 8 out of 10 people have occasional tension-type headache from time to time, and 1 to 2 out of 10 people suffer migraines.
- **Migraine triggers** Migraines can have many triggers, such as certain foods, stress, hunger, tiredness and can get worse during menstrual changes or when taking the combined oral contraceptive pill.

What can I expect to happen?

- ✓ **Rarely serious** Although headaches can severely affect your life, they're rarely serious or life-threatening. Most get better by themselves, often within 24 hours.
- ✓ **No need for investigations** You won't usually need further investigations, such as scans or blood tests.

What can I do myself to get better – now and in the future?

- ✓ **Headache diary** Keep a headache diary and record how often you get headaches, how long they last, and how bad they are on a scale of 0 to 10. This can be helpful to decide whether your headache follows a particular pattern and how effective treatments are. This can be helpful when you want to discuss your headaches with a health professional.
- ✓ **Lifestyle** Try to get plenty of rest and sleep, and use every opportunity to relax.
- ✓ **Diet and fluids** Drink at least 6 to 8 glasses of fluid (ideally water) a day. Avoid alcohol and skipping meals. Acupuncture can help to prevent migraine attacks.
- ✓ **Pain killers** Various pain killers are available without prescription from your pharmacist which can be helpful for treating headaches. Choosing a preparation often comes down to personal preferences and needs to take into account other medical conditions that you may have, other medicines that you may be taking,

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and the risk of potential side effects. Special migraine medications are available for treating migraine attacks.

When should I seek medical help?

Seek medical advice if you feel unwell between your headaches, if over the counter treatments don't relieve your symptoms, or if your headaches are so severe that you find it difficult to get on with your daily activities or go to work. Also speak to a health professional if you notice any of the following:

- **Increasing frequency** You get headaches more and more frequently than is 'normal' for you.
- **Additional symptoms** You vomit for no apparent reason or have a high fever. You develop a stiff neck or feel drowsy.
- **After head injury** You suffer from persisting headaches after a blow or other injury to your head (though a mild headache for one to two days after a head injury is common and usually harmless).
- **Sleep** Your headache prevents you from getting to sleep or wakes you.
- **Certain situations** Your headache is worse on coughing, straining, bending, lying flat or laughing.
- **Speech and personality** You notice a change in speech or personality.
- **Odd sensations** You develop weakness, numbness or other odd sensations anywhere on your body, or you feel unsteady on your feet.
- **Severity** You develop a sudden severe headache, like 'being hit with a hammer'.
- **Eyes** Your eyes feel really uncomfortable when looking at bright light, or you suffer other new eye symptoms, such as sudden blind spots.
- **Others pains** You suffer muscle pains, have pain on chewing, a tender scalp, or feel unwell.

Where can I find out more?

NHS Choices (<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/headache/Pages/Introduction.aspx>) and the Pain Toolkit (www.paintoolkit.org) have more information on how you can treat and prevent headache. Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms.