



FROM THE OFFICE OF DR.

# Taking the tension out of tension-type headaches

Tension-type headaches, the most common type of headaches in adults, are thought to be caused by tightened muscles in the back of the neck and scalp. This muscle tension may be caused by inadequate rest, poor posture, or stress. Common sources of stress include family, work, and school. There is also a theory that people who often have tension-type headaches are more sensitive to pain.

People usually describe tension headaches as a constant, mild-to-moderate, band-like pain or pressure. The pain is usually throbbing and affects the front, top, or sides of the head. The headaches may last from 30 minutes to several days.

This type of headache is not inherited, although women are twice as likely as men to suffer from them.

## How are tension-type headaches diagnosed?

To treat your headaches effectively, your doctor must determine if you truly have tension-type headaches and not some other type such as migraines or headaches caused by various diseases. He or she will ask you how the headaches feel, what medications you have taken in the past, and what medications are currently taking.

Your physician will also examine you—if you truly have tension-type headaches, he or she will probably find nothing wrong in the exam. You may even have an interview with a psychologist—usually, no psychological problems are discovered, but stress factors are usually identified.

You probably will not need any additional blood tests or x-rays, but if any studies or tests were previously performed, please bring them with you to your appointment.

## How are tension-type headaches treated?

Tension-type headaches are treated with medication and non-drug treatments such as stress management, relaxation training, and counseling. Regardless of the treatment, tension-type headaches are best treated when the symptoms first begin and are mild, before they become more frequent and painful.

## Medications

To relieve the symptoms of tension headaches, over-the-counter medications are recommended. Ask your doctor or pharmacist about using acetaminophen (Tylenol, others), ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, others), aspirin, or naproxen (Aleve, others).

If you have headaches on most days of the month, your doctor may suggest taking a medication every day, which may prevent the headaches or make them less severe. These medications may include antidepressants with a sedating effect such as amitriptyline (Elavil) and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen and naproxen.

These medications are not habit-forming. However, overuse of some other headache medications can actually lead to headaches—and stopping these medications suddenly almost

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always causes more headaches! The medications that cause this problem most often are those that contain ergotamine, butalbital, opiates, and caffeine. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions about your medications.

### **Non-drug treatments**

It is helpful to recognize and treat the underlying stress and tension that are causing the headaches. Counseling may help you identify the headache triggers and learn useful coping methods.

**Relaxation techniques** include deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, mental imagery relaxation, and relaxation to music.

**Biofeedback** is another method of learning how to manage stress. During biofeedback, sensors are connected to your body to detect changes in muscle tension, blood pressure, heart rate, and skin temperature and to provide immediate feedback through a tone or display on a computer screen. Biofeedback helps you recognize that your body is tense, identify what you are doing to make it tense, and learn how to reduce the tension.

**Other tips** for managing headaches:

- Apply an ice pack to the painful area of your head. Try placing it on your forehead, temples, or the back of your neck.
- Take a warm bath or shower, take a nap, or take a walk.
- Ask someone to rub your neck and back, or treat yourself to a massage.
- Apply gentle, steady rotating pressure to the painful area of your head with your index finger or thumb. Maintain pressure for 7 to 15 seconds, then release. Repeat as needed.
- Rest, sit or lie quietly in a low-lit room. Close your eyes and try to release the tension in your back, neck and shoulders.
- If you have excessive muscle contractions in the neck, physical therapy exercises performed daily are often helpful.