

MCLA Health Services

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Self Care Sheet

Headache

A headache, pain in the head or neck, is one of the most common locations for pain complaints in the body and generally involves the head and upper neck. There are both primary (such as migraine, tension or cluster headaches) and secondary headache (due to an underlying disease, injury or illness). Tension headaches are the most common type of headache usually experienced as a mild tight band or pressure, starting at the back of the head but expands to the temples and forehead. Tension headache occur from physical or emotional stress on the body which cause the muscles of the neck and around the skull to contract and spasm. Migraine headaches are the second most common and are caused by the swelling of blood vessels triggered by a nerve. Migraines begin as a dull ache and then develop into a constant throbbing, pulsating pain felt at the temples, front or back and typically one side of the head. Migraines are usually accompanied by a combination of nausea, vomiting and light and sound sensitivity. Some people experience an aura or visual changes (dots, flashing lights, jagged lines, blind spots or tunnel vision) that occur 20-60 minutes before the beginning of the headache. Migraine headaches have many triggers: food, caffeine, changes in sleep pattern, hormonal related to the menstrual cycle, bright lights, changes in weather patterns and stress.

Home Care and Prevention

- ⇒ Don't let lack of knowledge fuel your headache pain anxiety. Keep a headache diary and record events, activities and habits associated with headache development. Educate yourself about the triggers for your headaches and avoid them.
- ⇒ Get regular exercise. Take breaks from prolonged sitting at a desk or computer and stretch your neck and shoulders. Watch the weight in your back packs that put pressure on the neck and shoulders.
- ⇒ Avoid nicotine and excessive caffeine and sudden caffeine withdrawal.
- ⇒ For tension headaches massage, heat or ice to the head or neck and over-the-counter products like acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) or naproxen (Aleve) may give relief. *It is important to avoid daily use of any pain medication as this may actually cause what is called a rebound headache.*
- ⇒ For migraine headaches lie down in a dark room with an ice pack to the head. Approved medications for migraines include Excedrine Migraine, Advil Migraine or Motrin Migraine (all contain caffeine) or use plain ibuprofen if caffeine intolerant. It is helpful to take medication for migraine as early in the headache as possible.

How do I know if my headache is serious and requires immediate medical care?

- ⇒ If your headache is sudden and severe and presents in an atypical way than ever before.
- ⇒ If your headache occurs with fever, stiff neck and uncontrolled vomiting.
- ⇒ If your headache causes confusion or loss of consciousness.
- ⇒ If you headache begins after a head injury.

Follow up at Health Services for further evaluation and treatment. Any concern for serious headache should seek more immediate medical attention.