

# MANAGING YOUR TENSION HEADACHE

Tension headaches are usually dull, aching, or throbbing headaches that are often related to feelings of fullness, tightness, or pressure (such as feeling as if the head will burst, or as if it's bound or clamped in a vise).



**Possible triggers of a tension headache include:**



Stress and alcohol

Cold foods

Depression

Not enough or too much sleep

In addition to head, neck, and facial pain, people may have nausea or increased sensitivity to light or sound.

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and examine you. Tests aren't usually needed.



## What Is Tension Headache?

Tension headaches are dull, aching, or throbbing headaches, often with feelings of fullness, tightness, or pressure. A feeling that the head will burst or is bound or clamped in a vise can occur. Both sides of the head and neck are usually affected, especially where neck muscles attach to the skull. These headaches also involve the forehead and temples.

## What Causes Tension Headache?

The exact cause of tension headaches is unknown. Possible triggers can be stress, not enough or too much sleep, eating or drinking too much, work, anxiety, depression, eye strain (including sun glare), drugs, alcohol, allergies, food additives, fumes, and chemicals. Women can also get headaches more frequently because of hormone changes.

## What Are the Symptoms of Tension Headache?

Symptoms include moderate pain in front or back of the head, neck or scalp tightness, constant pain over sides of the head (like a clamp), throbbing pain all over the face, head pain on awakening, and head pain that interrupts sleep.

## How Is Tension Headache Diagnosed?

Tests aren't usually needed. The health care provider will ask about headaches and other symptoms and will do a physical examination, especially a neurological examination. More tests such as MRI of the brain may be done to check for other possible problems or when the diagnosis is unclear.

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Over-the-counter medications (such as aspirin or acetaminophen) can usually relieve pain. Some people may need prescription drugs.



For headaches caused by stress, self-help activities such as yoga, regular exercise, tai chi, relaxation, and biofeedback may help control the stress.

Eat regular meals. Don't eat foods containing nitrates (such as hot dogs) or other additives.



Call your health care provider if you have a fever, vomiting, or change in vision.

Don't smoke or drink alcohol in excess.



### How Is Tension Headache Treated?

The best way to stop these headaches is to avoid the cause if it's known.

Over-the-counter medications (aspirin or acetaminophen) can usually relieve pain.

If headaches are due to stress, self-help activities such as yoga, exercise, tai chi, relaxation, and biofeedback may help control the stress. Counseling may be suggested for emotional problems, anxiety, or depression.

Tension headaches may respond to massage, relaxation, and anti-anxiety medicines. Some people may need prescription medicine.

### DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Tension Headache:

- ✓ **DO** stop what you're doing and try to relax when a headache occurs.
- ✓ **DO** massage your shoulders, neck, jaw, or scalp.
- ✓ **DO** take a hot bath or shower.
- ✓ **DO** place a warm or cold cloth over your forehead.
- ✓ **DO** keep a diary of your headaches.
- ✓ **DO** follow a healthy lifestyle. Eat regular meals. Get enough sleep. Exercise regularly.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if your symptoms are worse or last longer than usual, your usual medicine doesn't work, or you have a fever, vomiting, or change in vision.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have problems with your medicine.
  
- ⊗ **DON'T** skip breakfast.
- ⊗ **DON'T** smoke or be in a smoky environment.
- ⊗ **DON'T** expose yourself to chemicals.
- ⊗ **DON'T** drink alcohol in excess. Avoid stimulants such as caffeine.
- ⊗ **DON'T** take drugs not prescribed by your health care provider.
- ⊗ **DON'T** eat foods containing nitrates (such as hot dogs) or other additives that may cause sensitivity.
- ⊗ **DON'T** overuse prescription or over-the-counter pain pills, which can cause a rebound headache.

### FROM THE DESK OF

### NOTES

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

#### Contact the following sources:

- National Headache Foundation  
Tel: (888) 643-5552  
**Website: <http://www.headaches.org>**
- American Council for Headache Education  
Tel: (800) 255-ACHE (255-2243)  
**Website: <http://www.achenet.org>**