

Headache and Migraine

SELF-CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO. 6

This fact sheet helps you know what is normal and what you can expect to happen if you develop an occasional headache or migraine. 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. Tension headache tends to be mild to moderately severe and affects both sides of the head. It usually feels like ‘pressing’ or ‘tightening’ and is not made worse by routine daily activities. Migraine is a moderate or severe throbbing headache affecting one or both sides of the head and made worse by ordinary daily activities.

Less common causes of headache

These include cluster headache (a severe or very severe pain around and above the eye), headache from overusing pain killers (affecting about one to two out of 100 people), inflamed blood vessels, and raised pressure inside the head (for example from a bleed or tumour).

Headaches are common

Tension headaches are very common and most people get them from time to time. 15 per cent of adults in the UK suffer from migraines.

Migraine triggers

Migraines can have many triggers, such as certain foods, stress, hunger and tiredness. Changes in the menstrual cycle, menopause and hormonal contraception can have an impact on migraines.

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.

Will I need further tests?

You won’t usually need further tests, such as scans or blood tests.

Treatment for headache and migraine

Painkillers: Various painkillers are available without prescription from your pharmacy. Choosing one often comes down to personal preferences, any medical conditions that you may have, other medicines that you may be taking, and the risk of potential side effects. Special migraine medications are available for treating migraine attacks on prescription from your GP. Avoid taking painkillers for headaches for more than 10 to 15 days per month as this can also cause headaches.

Ask a member of your pharmacy team for advice and always read the information about allergies on the pack or the patient information leaflet included.

Other treatments: Acupuncture can help with migraine and tension type headache. Riboflavin, magnesium and co-enzyme Q10 (available as food supplements from health food shops) may help reduce migraine frequency and intensity in some people. Manual therapy may help if you also suffer from neck aches.

What can I do to help myself now and in the future?

As well as pain relief, there are things you can do to help:

Headache diary: Keep a headache diary and record how often you get headaches, how long they last, and whether they are mild, moderate or severe.

- This can show whether your headaches follow a particular pattern and how they respond to treatment, which is useful when discussing them with a health professional.
- A headache diary can also be used to find and help you manage triggers.
- A useful online version for monitoring migraine headache is available on the [Migraine Trust website](https://www.migrainetrust.org/).

Lifestyle: Try to keep a regular sleep pattern and exercise regularly.

Diet and fluids: Drink at least 6 to 8 glasses of fluid (ideally water) a day. Avoid alcohol, reduce caffeine and take regular meals.

When to seek help

Seek medical advice if over the counter treatments don't relieve your symptoms, or if 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:

Frequency: Your headaches become more frequent.

Other symptoms: You vomit for no clear reason or have a fever. You develop a stiff neck or feel drowsy.

After head injury: You have persistent headaches after a blow or other injury to your head (though a mild headache for 1 to 2 days after a head injury is common and usually harmless).

Sleep: Your headache stops you from getting to sleep or wakes you up.

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 have weakness, numbness or other odd sensations anywhere on your body, or you feel unsteady on your feet.

Severity: You have a sudden severe headache, like 'being hit with a hammer'.

Eyes: Your eyes feel uncomfortable when looking at bright light, or you have new eye symptoms, such as sudden blind spots or loss of vision.

Other symptoms: You have muscle pains, pain on chewing, a tender scalp, or feel unwell.

Where to find out more

A member of your pharmacy team can help with pain relief and advice.

Or, visit these reputable websites for more information:

[NHS Website](https://www.nhs.uk/)

[Migraine Trust](https://www.migrainetrust.org/)

[Clusterbusters](https://www.clusterbusters.co.uk/)

[BASH \(British Association for the study of headaches\)](https://www.bash.ac.uk/)