

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 impact migraines.

What can I expect to happen?

Rarely serious

Although headaches can have a big impact on 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 tests, such as scans or blood tests.

Treatment for headache and migraine

A member of your pharmacy team can help assess and manage your symptoms.

Painkillers: Painkillers are available without prescription from your pharmacy. Choosing one based on personal preferences and any other 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 acute migraine attacks on prescription from your GP. People with frequent or debilitating migraine may also need preventative treatment.

Medication overuse headache: Painkillers or medication for treating acute migraine attacks should only be used for up to 2 days a week. This is because overuse of these medications can also cause headaches.

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 some people, although evidence is limited. 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 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 medication does not relieve your headaches, or if it is difficult to carry out your usual daily activities or go to work.

Also speak to a health professional, or call NHS 111 if you notice any of the following:

- Your headaches are becoming more frequent or getting worse.
- You are vomiting without an obvious reason or have a fever.
- You have ongoing or worrying symptoms after a blow or other injury to your head. A mild headache for a short time after a minor head injury can be common.
- Your headache regularly stops you getting to sleep or wakes you from sleep.
- Your headache is triggered or made worse by coughing, straining, bending down, lying flat or exercising.
- You develop new problems with your eyes or vision, such as blurred or double vision.
- You have scalp tenderness, pain in your jaw when chewing, muscle pains or feel generally unwell.

Call 999 or go to A&E if you have a headache and:

- The headache starts suddenly and is extremely painful, for example feeling like you have been 'hit with a hammer'.
- You develop new weakness or numbness in your face, arms, legs or elsewhere in your body.
- You suddenly have difficulty speaking, remembering things, walking or keeping your balance.
- You become unusually drowsy, confused or difficult to wake.
- You have a seizure (fit).
- You suddenly lose your vision.
- You have a very high temperature with a stiff neck, severe headache or discomfort looking at bright light.
- You have a headache after a head injury and develop symptoms such as difficulty staying awake, weakness or numbness, problems speaking or walking, a seizure, or problems with your vision.

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.org/)

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

