

Headaches - Causes and Management

Health Webinar

Lajna UK

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What we will cover



The main types of headaches and their causes



General overview of how to manage headaches, and specifically migraines



When to seek urgent medical attention



When to visit your GP



Useful resources



Your Questions

The burden of Headaches

Headache is one of the most common reasons for patients to consult with a doctor

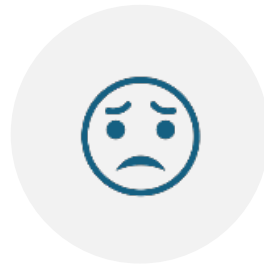
More than 1/3 of us get a headache at least once a week

In the UK, on average 4% of annual GP appointments are for headaches

The main types of Headache we see



MIGRAINE
(33%)



TENSION TYPE HEADACHES
(41%)



CLUSTER HEADACHE
(10%)



OTHER

Migraine

- Migraine is among the most common reasons people seek medical help for headaches.
- Approximately **10 million (23%)** people are affected by migraine in the UK.
- Those in their 20s, 30s and 40s are most likely to be affected but migraines also affect children and older people.
- Migraines affect **2-3X more women** than men. This may be due to hormonal factors as well as genetic factors.
- People living with migraine commonly have other long term mental and physical health conditions, meaning that they have an even greater burden to cope with.

(Ref.: The National Migraine Trust <https://migrainetrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/State-of-the-Migraine-Nation-population-rapid-review.pdf>)



What is a migraine?

- If you have a migraine, the nerves in your brain are thought to be more sensitive than normal.
- A migraine attack starts when the nerves become over stimulated. This leads to changes in nerve signals, chemicals and blood vessels in your brain.
- Migraines can happen without any trigger but often there are certain triggers that make you more likely to have an attack.




Symptoms of migraine

Typical migraine symptoms include a moderate to severe headache, usually on one side. This can be associated with nausea or vomiting and sensitivity to light and sound

Around 1 in 3 people get '**aura**' symptoms with migraines such as disturbance in vision, speech or sensation

Migraine is different from other types of headaches due to the intensity of pain and the pain usually being one sided

Migraine attacks usually last between 4-72 hours and are often episodic, occurring a few times a month or more chronic if they occur more than 15 times a month



Some common migraine triggers

- **Hormones** - Migraine is frequently linked to change in hormone levels, particularly oestrogen.
- **Stress** - Stress is one of the most commonly-reported triggers for migraine attacks.
- **Lack of sleep** - Sleep deprivation can have a direct effect on the migraine pathway in the brain.
- **Skipping meals** - missing meals causes a drop in your blood sugar levels. Many people find migraine attacks can become more frequent and more severe after a period without eating.
- **Caffeine** - Having too much caffeine can lead to a migraine attack for some people.
- **Specific foods** - Common examples include chocolate, dairy, and foods containing tyramine
- **Dehydration** - Not drinking enough fluids can lead to dehydration. This can appear to trigger or worsen migraine attacks for some people - aim for six to eight glasses of fluid a day to keep hydrated.
- **Weather changes**
- **Bright or flickering lights, noise and odours** are all frequently reported as triggers for migraine attacks.
- **Screen use** - Looking at screens for a long time has been linked to increased risk of migraine attack for some people. It's important to take regular breaks from the screen or adjust the brightness of your screen. **We spend an average of 198 days a year staring at screens**

How to manage migraine symptoms

- Identify migraine symptoms and treat early – don't wait for the pain to get worse
- **Track your triggers** – e.g. stress, sleep disturbance, skipping meals, hormones etc.
- Keeping a **headache diary** can help identify triggers and you can take steps to avoid these
- **Medications** – such as over-the-counter pain killers, or migraine specific medications called triptans. Always consult with your GP first before taking these.
- Some people with chronic migraines are started on preventative migraine treatment which they take daily to prevent migraine attacks.
- **Alternative treatments** – e.g. acupuncture, relaxation techniques, lifestyle adjustment
- **Natural supplements** – Riboflavin (vitamin B2), Magnesium, CoQ10 – evidence for these is variable and they are not available via NHS prescriptions. National Migraine Centre has useful information on these





Tension Type Headache

- Most common type of headache people experience
- Usually felt like a tight band across the forehead
- Pain can be felt on both sides of the head most often at the front
- There are often no other symptoms with this type of headache
- Usually caused by tightness in the muscles at the back of the neck and over the scalp from poor posture or stress
- Poor sleep, eye strain, stress, loud noise and bright sunlight can also trigger tension headaches

How to manage tension headaches



Simple pain relief like paracetamol or ibuprofen (if no contraindication) can be used short term



Relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises and managing stress as this is a common trigger for tension headaches



Regular exercise such as walking, running or cycling several times a week can help prevent tension headaches



Gentle neck massage or using ice packs on the forehead can help ease tension headaches



Ensure you are getting enough sleep



Drinking plenty of non caffeinated fluids as dehydration can also be a trigger



Maintain good posture



Cluster Headache

- The **most painful** type of headaches
- Rare but can cause very severe pain on one side of the head, often around the eye – “knife like”
- Associated watery or red eye, runny nose, sweating
- Caused by problems with nerve misfiring, causing over stimulation of nerves and blood vessel changes.
- Often no clear triggers but can be worse with exercise, strong smells and high temperatures.
- Managed by headache specialists as over the counter pain killers don't help



Other Causes of Headaches

- Trauma or injury to the head or neck
- Headache caused by neck or shoulder pain
- Medication over use headache
- Infection – sinus pain, flu, meningitis
- Disruption of blood flow to brain – stroke, aneurysm
- Malignancy (0.1% of all headaches)

What you can do to help ease headaches



Drink plenty of water



Cut down on the amount of caffeine you drink



Make sure your eye test is up to date



Get good amount of sleep



Reduce the amount of screen use – laptops, phone, tablets



Reduce stress levels



Do more physical activity

When to seek **urgent** medical attention for a headache



Headache accompanied by a high fever +/- rash or neck stiffness



A sudden, very severe headache



Headache with weakness or abnormal sensation in your face, arms or legs, or difficulty speaking



Associated confusion or feeling drowsy



A red, painful eye or sudden change in vision with headache

When to see your GP

New headaches especially after the age of 50 years

Any change in the nature or severity of headaches

Headaches triggered by activity

Headaches that are not improving with medication or avoidance of triggers

Associated weight loss, fatigue or nausea

Headaches in pregnancy

Headaches in children

Up to 50% of children aged seven years and up to 80% of 15 year olds have experienced at least one headache.

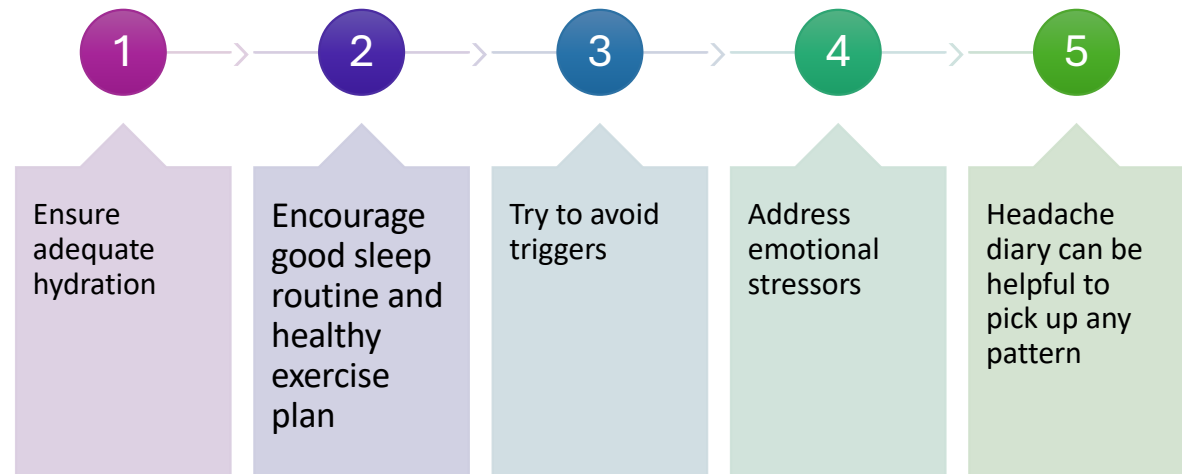
50% of headaches in children are due to viral illnesses, migraines, or tension type headache.

There may be a family history of migraines

Lifestyle factors can also cause headaches in children such as poor quality sleep, looking at screen for a long time, eyesight problems, emotional problems such as problems at school or changes in family circumstances.



Managing headaches in children



When to worry about headaches in children

Sudden, severe or frequent headaches

Other symptoms associated with headache such as difficulty with speech, balance or coordination problems

Headaches that are waking the child up at night, associated vomiting, or early morning headaches

Problems with vision

Sudden change in behaviour

Summary of key points



Headaches are common and usually not serious



Migraine headaches can be very debilitating and avoidance of triggers is important in management



Tension headaches often improve with relaxation techniques and managing stressful triggers



Focus on lifestyle factors rather than medication



Avoid medication over use – if headaches are not improving or worsening symptoms seek medical attention early

Useful Resources



BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY
OF HEADACHES
[HTTPS://BASH.ORG.UK/HEADACHE-
SUFFERERS/](https://bash.org.uk/headache-sufferers/)



THE MIGRAINE TRUST
[HTTPS://MIGRAINETRUST.ORG/GET-
SUPPORT/RESOURCES/](https://migrainetrust.org/get-support/resources/)



NHS UK
[HTTPS://WWW.NHS.UK/SYMPTOMS/HE
ADACHES/](https://www.nhs.uk/symptoms/headaches/)

References

- <https://www.nationalmigrainecentre.org.uk/understanding-migraine/factsheets-and-resources/cluster-headache/>
- <https://www.england.nhs.uk/rightcare/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/2020/01/rightcare-headache-and-migraine-toolkit-v1.pdf>
- <https://cks.nice.org.uk/topics/headache-assessment/background-information/prevalence/>
- <https://www.gosh.nhs.uk/conditions-and-treatments/general-medical-conditions/headache/>