

Emergency Services

Headaches

A headache is any kind of pain in the head, scalp, or neck. There are many different kinds of headaches, with many different causes.

Fortunately, headaches are not usually a sign of a serious medical problem. Only rarely is a headache a sign of a serious medical problem.

Most headaches go away with or without treatment. Headaches can be treated with a combination of medicine, managing stress, changing situations, and/or changing diet and lifestyle.

Types of Headache

The two most common types of headaches are tension headaches and migraine headaches.



Tension Headache

The pain of a tension headache is usually dull and constant (not throbbing). You might feel a tightness or pressure all around the head. Some people also have a tight feeling in their jaw or neck muscles.

These headaches can be from:

- tight muscles in the shoulders, neck, scalp and face
- being over-tired
- eye strain
- emotional upset

Tension headaches usually last from a few seconds to a few hours.

Migraine Headache

The pain of migraine headaches is severe, throbbing, or pulsating. Migraines are often felt on just one side of the head. Most people also feel sick to their stomach (nausea), vomit, and cannot tolerate light or noise. Migraines often make it hard to concentrate and get through everyday activities. They can last a few hours to a few days, even weeks.

Treatment includes medicine for pain and avoiding whatever triggers the headaches. The exact cause of migraine is not fully understood.

When to get help

Go to the nearest Emergency Department if:

- The headache feels like 'the worst headache in your life'.
- You have a headache along with any of the following:
 - feeling very confused or having trouble understanding others
 - a fever (more than 38°C or 100.4°F)
 - a stiff neck
 - trouble seeing
 - trouble speaking
 - trouble walking
 - throwing up
 - numbness or weakness on one side of your body

Headaches - *continued*

When to get help - continued

See your doctor or go to the nearest walk-in clinic if you notice any of the following:

- You have headaches more often than usual.
- Your headaches are interfering with your work, sleep, or daily activities.
- Your headaches are getting more painful or last longer than usual.
- Your headache gets worse or does not get better with the medicine that normally works for you.

To learn more, it's good to ask:

- Your family doctor
- Your pharmacist
- HealthLinkBC 8-1-1 (7-1-1 for deaf and hard of hearing) or online at www.HealthLinkBC.ca

How to care for yourself at home

- To help get rid of your headache, try some or all of the following measures:
 - Stretch and massage the muscles in your shoulders, neck, jaw, and scalp.
 - Take a hot bath.
 - Lie down in a quiet room.
 - Place a warm, dry cloth, or a cold wet cloth, or an ice pack (whichever feels better) over the aching area.
- Eat regularly. You do not need to change what you eat, but do not skip meals or delay meals for very long.
- Drink at least 6 to 8 glasses of water and other liquids each day. **Do not** drink coffee, tea, or alcohol. These make you lose fluid, resulting in dehydration. Dehydration can make your headache worse.
- **Do not** smoke or inhale second-hand smoke. Smoke often makes your headache worse.
- One of the best ways to get rid of a headache is to get a good night's sleep.
- **If we gave you an injection of a narcotic, for the next 12 hours:**
 - **Do not** drive.
 - **Do not** do anything that where you need to be alert or to make important decisions.

Adapted from 'FM.280.H34 Headache' (March 2012) with permission from Vancouver Coastal Health.

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This information does not replace the advice given to you by your health care provider.