

Tension headache

Tension headache is pain in the head due to muscle tightening.

It feels as though the scalp or the back of the neck were being squeezed in a vice. It is very common and in some people may be recurrent or chronic.

Some patients who suffer from tension headaches also suffer from another type of headache: migraines.

This is known as mixed headache, in which there are alternate pain episodes from one sort or the other. (For advice on migraines, please consult sheet no. 28).

Preventing headache:

Avoid taking high doses of pain relievers (codeine, ergotamines, paracetamol, etc.) on a daily basis, as **you could end up having headaches** through overuse of analgesics.

Get the right amount of sleep.

Stress, anxiety or depression can cause headaches. Try to keep them under control.

Exercise at least half an hour a day: it helps to reduce pain caused by muscle and nerve tension and to prevent chronic pain.

It is advisable to quit smoking and drinking alcohol. If coffee and cola drinks make you feel jittery, they can aggravate your headache.

How to handle pain flare-ups:

Take a break from work or your problems by going for a walk, relaxing or resting.

Take a tablet of paracetamol or paracetamol plus codeine or an anti-inflammatory as soon as the pain starts.

Steeped mint leaves have an analgesic effect; you can combine some with a relaxing herbal tea.

If the pain affects the back of the head and neck, a massage and hot compresses or baths will also help relieve it.



When should you consult with a doctor?

If your headache pattern feels different.

If the pain increases when you do exercise or cough.

If it wakes you up during the night.

If you need to take painkillers most days.

If you have feelings of intense sadness.

If you are unable to reduce anxiety.

If the pain becomes more severe or more localized, or if it is associated with fever or mental confusion.