



Pharmaceutical  
Society of Australia



# Headache

**There are several different types of headache and many different causes. Most people get headaches occasionally, but some people often get headaches. A headache can be a symptom of a serious illness. Doctors and pharmacists can help identify the type and cause of a headache and advise on treatment.**

## Some common headaches

### Tension-type headache

Tension-type headache is the most common type of headache. It often feels like a tight band of pressure around the head or a dull ache in the forehead or at the sides and back of the head or neck. The pain develops gradually and tends to become more severe during the late afternoon and evening. A tension-type headache may last from 30 minutes to several days.

### Migraine

A severe, throbbing headache commonly felt on only one side of the head, often behind the eye. It may be accompanied by other symptoms such as nausea and vomiting and sensitivity to light and noise. Some people get an aura (e.g., flashing lights, blurred vision, tingling or numbness) up to an hour before the pain starts. A migraine may last from 4 to 72 hours.

### Sinus headache

Sinuses are air-filled spaces within the bones around the nose. Inflammation or congestion in a sinus

can cause pain and tenderness, usually around the eyes, cheeks or forehead. Only one side of the face may be affected and the pain is often worse when bending forward or lying down. Allergy and infection can cause sinus inflammation. Sinuses can become congested due to increased mucus production or reduced mucus drainage or both.

### Medicine overuse headache

Frequent use of some types of pain relievers for headache and migraine can lead to 'medicine overuse' headache. A cycle is set up whereby more frequent and severe headaches lead to increasing use of pain relieving medicine, which causes more frequent and severe headaches. Treatment involves stopping the overused medicine. Ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice.

## Headache triggers

Some people find that certain things trigger their headaches. Triggers are not the same for everyone and one person may have different triggers at different times. Different types of headaches usually have different types of triggers.

### Important

A headache can be a symptom of a serious medical condition. Doctors and pharmacists can help identify the type and cause of a headache and advise on treatment. Consult a doctor if headaches:

- Are not relieved by non-prescription pain relievers
- Require pain relievers more than 10-15 days in a month
- Are severe, get worse or become more frequent
- Start after exercise, sex, straining or coughing

- Disturb sleep or are present immediately on waking
- Develop while on the oral contraceptive pill or HRT
- Develop suddenly or are of a new type
- Develop after a head injury or an accident
- Develop after 50 years of age
- Are associated with confusion, drowsiness, vomiting, fever, stiff neck, rash, seizures, visual disturbances, stroke-like symptoms.

**Note:** Children under 16 years should not be given aspirin unless advised by a doctor.

Triggers for headaches include:

- Stress, tension, anxiety, depression
- Relaxation after stress (e.g., "weekend migraine")
- Allergy
- Hormone changes (e.g., menstruation, pregnancy)
- Caffeine (coffee, tea, cola, chocolate, energy drinks) withdrawal
- Certain foods and food additives (e.g., chocolate, citrus fruit, red wine, aged cheese, MSG)
- Alcohol
- Smoke, particularly from cigarettes
- Delaying or missing meals and drinks
- Too little or too much sleep
- Bright or flickering light
- Eye strain
- Strong smells or fumes
- Noise
- Weather, air pressure and altitude changes
- Some medicines (e.g., oral contraceptives, HRT, overuse of pain relievers)
- Infections and other illnesses
- Jaw and dental problems
- Back and neck problems
- Poor posture
- Muscle tension
- Head trauma.

## Self care

- Keep a headache diary to identify headache pattern, possible triggers, helpful treatments and how often you use pain relieving medicines.
- Avoid headache triggers if possible.
- To reduce stress, plan ahead and let others help you.
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to relax mind and body.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week. Exercise can help relieve stress.
- Get enough sleep.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises otherwise).

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

- Limit caffeine and alcohol intake. Follow low-risk drinking guidelines for alcohol.
- Don't smoke.
- Wear sunglasses to reduce glare.
- Pay attention to your posture. Take regular breaks if you work in the same position all day. Ask a physiotherapist for advice.

## Medicines

Different types of medicine can relieve different types of headache. Ask a doctor or pharmacist about medicines for your headache.

Medicines for headache include:

- Simple, non-prescription pain relievers (e.g., ibuprofen, paracetamol, aspirin). Soluble products may give faster relief.
- Strong prescription pain relievers.
- Prescription medicines that specifically relieve or prevent migraines.
- Anti-nausea medicines to relieve nausea and vomiting and improve the absorption of pain relievers during a migraine.
- Non-prescription decongestants, antihistamines, corticosteroid nasal sprays and saline nasal irrigations for sinus problems.

## Related fact cards

- *Alcohol*
- *Hay fever*
- *Migraine*
- *Pain Relievers*
- *Relaxation Techniques*
- *Sinus Problems*
- *Sleeping Problems*
- *Vision Impairment*

## For more information

**HEALTH/inside** – website [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

**Headache Australia** – phone 1300 886 660 or website [www.headacheaustralia.org.au](http://www.headacheaustralia.org.au)

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**The Poisons Information Centre** – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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*Always read the label. Use only as directed. Incorrect use could be harmful. If symptoms persist see your healthcare professional.*