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Patient information: Headache causes and diagnosis in adults (Beyond the Basics)

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HEADACHE OVERVIEW

Headaches can be quite debilitating, although most headaches are **not** caused by life-threatening disorders. Most headaches are caused by one of four syndromes ([table 1](#)):

- Tension-type headache
- Migraine headache
- Chronic daily headache
- Cluster headache

The causes and diagnosis of non-migraine headaches are discussed here. Migraine headaches are discussed separately. (See "[Patient information: Migraine headaches in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".) A summary of headache treatments is also available. (See "[Patient information: Headache treatment in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".) A discussion of headaches in children is available separately. (See "[Patient information: Headache in children \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

TENSION TYPE HEADACHE

Symptoms — Symptoms of tension type headaches (TTH) include:

- Pressure or tightness around both sides of the head or neck
- Mild to moderate pain that is steady and does not throb
- Pain is not worsened by activity
- Pain can increase or decrease in severity over the course of the headache
- There may be tenderness in the muscles of the head, neck, or shoulders

People with TTH often feel stress or tension before their headache. Unlike migraine, tension headaches occur without other symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to lights and sounds, or an aura. However, some people have symptoms of both tension and migraine headache.

MIGRAINE HEADACHES

Migraine headaches are a type of headache that causes moderate to severe pain that is worsened by light, noise, and motion. Some people also experience nausea and vomiting. Migraine headaches

typically last for a few hours, but may last for as long as three days. Migraines are discussed in detail in a separate article. (See "[Patient information: Migraine headaches in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

CLUSTER HEADACHE

Cluster headaches are severe, debilitating headaches that occur repeatedly for weeks to months at a time, followed by periods with no headache. Cluster headaches are relatively uncommon, affecting less than one percent of people. Men are affected more commonly than women, with a peak age of onset of 25 to 50 years.

Symptoms — Cluster headaches:

- Begin quickly without any warning and reach a peak within a few minutes.
- The headache is usually deep, excruciating, continuous, and explosive in quality, although occasionally it may be pulsatile and throbbing.
- The attack may occur up to eight times per day but is usually short in duration (between 15 minutes and three hours).
- The pain typically begins in or around the eye or temple; less commonly it starts in the face, neck, ear, or side of the head.
- The pain is always on one side.
- Most people with cluster headache are restless and may pace or rock back and forth when an attack is in progress.
- Cluster headaches are associated with eye redness and tear production on the side of the pain, a stuffy and runny nose, sweating, and pale skin.
- Some people are light sensitive in the eye on the affected side.

Cluster headaches can begin at any age. People with cluster headaches are more likely to have family members who also have cluster headaches. Drinking alcohol can bring on a cluster headache.

CHRONIC DAILY HEADACHE

Some people develop very frequent headaches, as frequent as every day in some cases. When a headache is present for more than 15 days per month for at least three months, it is described as a chronic daily headache.

Chronic daily headache is not a type of headache but a category that includes frequent headaches of various kinds. Most people with chronic daily headache have migraine or tension-type headache as the underlying type of headache. They often start out having an occasional migraine or tension-type headache, but the headaches became more frequent over months or years. Some people with frequent headache use headache medications too often, which can lead to "medication-overuse headaches" (see '[Medication-overuse headache](#)' below).

Medication-overuse headache — Medication-overuse headache (MOH) may occur in people who have frequent migraine, cluster, or tension-type headaches, which leads them to overuse pain medications. A vicious cycle occurs whereby frequent headaches cause the person to take medication frequently (often non-prescription medication), which then causes a rebound headache as the medication wears off, causing more medication use, and so on.

Overuse of any number of pain medications can increase the risk of developing medication-overuse headaches. To avoid medication-overuse headaches, we recommend the following:

