

Headaches & Migraines

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"I only get them two to four times a week" a patient will say, as if they have come to accept headaches as a natural part of life. While they certainly aren't life-threatening, even mild headaches can be disruptive, while severe migraines can send someone to bed for days. While most people might get the occasional headache, you certainly don't have to live with having them on a regular basis.

This condition most dramatically displays the effectiveness of acupuncture -- the acupuncturist can press a variety of points known to relieve headaches, and if the patient gets instant relief or diminished symptoms, that point is needed. Often by the end of the appointment the headache is gone or almost gone. Patients should also be treated while they are not having headaches. Few people suffering from a severe migraine attack are going to feel like going to an appointment, and treatment can be based on the patient history and diagnosis just as easily, and prevent future recurrences.

Often this is not even the main complaint a patient will bring to an acupuncturist's office, but it will likely be another symptom of the condition for which they are seeking help. In Chinese Medicine, there are seventeen different diagnosis for headaches and migraines, plus combinations of these patterns.

The diagnosis is determined based on the type of pain (dull, achy, stabbing, sharp), time of day, location on the head, emotions, whether it's better or worse with activity or rest, foods that aggravate it, whether it's worse with more sexual activity, during the menses, or with weather changes, and whether it's better lying down or standing up.

Persistent and recurrent headaches that start in childhood, usually between the ages of seven to ten, often indicate a constitutional factor. This will be determined by the parents health in general, their health at the time of conception, and the mother's health during the pregnancy. While this cause is more challenging to treat, proper rest, exercise, food, and lifestyle can offset constitutional health weaknesses.

Emotions are the most frequent cause of headaches. Known as a "tension" or "stress" headache in Western Medicine, this type is often due to pent up anger or resentment, usually due to doing something you don't want to do, or not doing something you want to do. It is most often located on the temples or sides of the head. Headaches from worry are usually dull and located on the forehead or top of the head. Fear or shock will often cause symptoms in the entire head. Excessive mental work is a frequent cause of chronic headaches in both children and adults, especially with long hours of computer use. Often combined with worry about doing well at school or work, this can lead to severe headaches and migraines. Overwork can cause an ache in the whole head, or a one-sided migraine type.

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Headaches can be triggered by foods, including sensitivity to chemical additives such as MSG, aspartame, nitrates, or sensitivities to the foods themselves. Keeping a food journal can be very helpful in detecting this source of problems. Dietary habits can also be very important. Not eating enough, poor food choices, or digestive problems that prevent the proper uptake of nutrients will cause a headache on the top of the head. Overeating affects the forehead, and the pain will probably be sharp. Spicy foods may affect the sides of the head or the forehead, and will probably also be sharp. Damp-producing foods such as dairy, peanut butter, fruit juices, and wheat will probably cause a dull forehead ache and will be accompanied by a feeling of heaviness and stuffiness in the head. Too much salt over a long period of time can lead to a headache that is dull and located on the back of the head or in the whole head. Eating too quickly or while discussing stressful topics may result in a sharp headache on the forehead. Eating irregularly or too late at night may manifest as a dull forehead ache.

When a headache always occurs in the same small part of the head and are chronic, it is usually due to an old accident. This can cause headaches to start even years later when a new cause of disease, such as stress or a dietary problem, enters the picture. Often the original trauma has been long since forgotten.

Chocolate and excessive coffee consumption can both aggravate or precipitate a migraine attack. While prescription drugs with caffeine relieve the symptoms by dilating the blood vessels in the head, this will be followed by the blood vessels constricting, starting the cycle again. Since there is an underlying cause for the migraines, it is wise to treat the cause to avoid future attacks.

If you have never had headaches before and experience a sudden onset of severe pain, especially if accompanied by other symptoms, be sure to see your doctor to rule out serious causes.

There are many things you can try to relieve your headaches. Avoid chewing gum, cut back on your caffeine intake gradually, eliminate sodas, and drink at least two quarts of water per day. Practice relaxation techniques such as meditation or deep-breathing. Take regular breaks from your computer, and make sure your screen is at eye level. Try eating smaller, more frequent meals. Get adequate, quality sleep. A chiropractic adjustment may help. Either exercise more or get more rest, depending on which improves the pain and frequency.

Long-term reliance on painkillers can make chronic headaches worse by adding to the underlying problem. Keep a journal of what you were doing and eating prior to the onset of a headache or migraine, and the location, time, severity, and duration of the symptoms. Determining the cause is instrumental in treating symptoms.

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