HEADACHES

Headaches are a common health problem. When severe, they can affect quality of life and lessen productivity in school and in the workplace. Headaches are often treatable with medications and/or lifestyle changes. Your UHS clinician is available to evaluate your symptoms and help you find strategies for headache relief.

Tension and migraine headaches are the two most common types. These two types often overlap in their symptoms and their response to medication. Modes of relief and triggering factors vary from person to person.

**Typical Tension headache symptoms may include:**
- Dull, steady pain with a tight band-like or vise-like gripping pressure
- Pain intensity is mild compared to migraine
- Pain may be felt in the forehead, temples, back of neck or throughout the head
- Muscles in the back of the upper neck may feel knotted and tender to the touch
- Symptoms usually subside within a few hours

Tension headaches are often associated with stress, fatigue or muscle strain. Activities that put the head and neck in a tense, prolonged posture (i.e. reading, keyboarding, gum chewing or teeth grinding) can trigger tension headaches.

**Migraine characteristics include:**
- Pain typically on one side of the head
- Pain has a pulsating or throbbing quality
- Moderate to intense pain affecting daily activity
- Nausea or vomiting
- Sensitivity to light and sound
- Attacks last 4 to 72 hours, sometimes longer
- Visual disturbances or aura (e.g. wavy lines, dots, flashing lights and blind spots or disruptions in smell, taste or touch) from 20-60 minutes before onset of headache
- Exertion (e.g. climbing stairs or running) worsens the headache.

Migraine headaches are three times more common in women than in men. Family history of migraine is present in 70-80% of sufferers. Many women experience migraines related to the hormonal changes of menstruation, oral contraceptives, pregnancy, post-partum and menopause. If headaches become more frequent and intense with oral contraceptive use, it is important to inform your clinician. In some instances, a change in the type of oral contraceptive pill will lessen or alleviate the headaches. In other instances, the pill or hormone treatment must be discontinued.

Over the counter or prescription medications are often useful in pain management of migraines. It is possible however, to worsen headaches with frequent medication use. Talk with your clinician about all prescription, over the counter or herbal products you are taking for headache treatment. Your clinician will work with you to try to find the best strategy for headache relief and prevention.

Many people find headache improvement with relaxation and other self-care techniques. Rest in a darkened room, cool compresses, massage and a nap are examples. Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration.

**Common headache triggers include:**
- Stress or strong emotion
- Nuts and peanut butter
- Smoke, perfume or chemical orders
- Bright lights
- Aspartame artificial sweetener
- Sardines, anchovies, picked herring
- MSG
- Freshly baked yeast products
- Eye strain (if you wear glasses, make sure your prescription is current)
- Low blood sugar
- Chocolate
- Sour cream or yogurt
- Lack of sleep or oversleeping
- Caffeine (although coffee can also relieve a migraine)
- Weather changes
- Red wine, champagne, beer
- Cured meat (e.g. hot dogs, bacon)

Keeping a headache diary helps you to determine which factors might influence your headache pattern. The diary allows you to list date, duration, trigger factors, treatments and time until relief of headache. Bring the diary with you to your medical visit to help your clinician determine treatment options. A sample headache diary is included on the back of this handout.

**Internet resources for headache information:**

Check our website: [www.uhs.berkeley.edu](http://www.uhs.berkeley.edu) to learn more about this medical concern or others.

For an appointment [www.uhs.berkeley.edu](http://www.uhs.berkeley.edu) or call 510-642-2000  Clinic [Nurse 510-643-7197](http://510-643-7197) for advice

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