

FAST FACTS: Headache

A Headache is a pain anywhere in the region of the head or neck caused by disturbance of the pain-sensitive structures around the brain. There are over 200 types of headaches which can be a symptom of a number of different conditions with causes ranging from harmless to life-threatening. The description of the headache, together with findings on neurological examination, determines the need for any further investigations and the most appropriate treatment.

- **Primary Headaches** occur on their own with no detectable underlying cause.
 - Migraine – pulsating in character, affecting one side of the head, associated with nausea, can be disabling in severity, lasting 3 hours to 3 days.
 - Trigeminal Neuralgia – a shooting severe facial neuropathic pain.
 - Tension – band-like or squeezing, does not worsen with routine activity, may be brought on by stress.
 - Cluster – severe pains that occur together in bouts.
- **Secondary Headaches** are caused by an underlying condition or disease.
 - Brain tumor
 - Stroke
 - Medication overuse
 - Head injury
 - Aneurysm
- **Red Flag/Dangerous symptoms** are potentially serious situations that need urgent referral.
 - Sudden onset, new or different headache in someone over 50 years old.
 - Abnormal neurological exam, mental confusion, vision problems.
 - Headache worsened by exertion, coughing, or straining.
 - Headaches in people with HIV, cancer, or at risk for blood clots.
 - Headache with fever, vomiting, weakness, or neck stiffness.

Assessment

- History of headaches
- Recent trauma (e.g. falls)
- Vital signs
- Neurological exam including vision-sudden onset
- Excruciating pain – sudden onset
- Medication review (focus on anticoagulants, benzodiazepines, sedating medications)

Interventions

- Quiet, dark environment for migraines, cluster, tension headaches.
- Medications -Acetaminophen or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.
- Abortive medications - over the counter or prescription for migraines taken during an active migraine attack.
- Anticonvulsants or surgery for Trigeminal Neuralgia.
- Antidepressants.

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References:

The International Classification of Headache Disorders, published by the International Headache Society.
<http://www.ihs-headache.org/ichd-guidelines>.

Reuben, DB, Herr, KA, Pacala, JT, et al. Geriatrics at Your Fingertips. 24th Edition. p. 283 New York: The American Geriatrics Society; 2022.