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 facial 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

- **Red Flag symptoms** – potentially serious situations that needs 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 is key. Treatment of a headache depends on the underlying cause. Not all headaches require medical attention and most respond with simple analgesics such as acetaminophen, or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as aspirin and ibuprofen.

**References**