FAST FACTS: Headache

A headache is pain anywhere in 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. Description of the headache, together with neurological findings, determines the need for further investigations and the most appropriate treatment.

✔ **Types of Headaches**
  - Primary Headaches occur on their own with no detectable underlying cause
    - Migraine- pulsating in character, affecting one side of head, associated with nausea, can be disabling in severity, lasting 3 hours to 3 days
    - Trigeminal Neuralgia- a shooting pain in face
    - 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** - should be reported to a medical provider immediately
  - Sudden onset, new or different headache in someone over 50
  - Mental confusion and/or vision problems
  - Headache made worse by exertion, coughing or straining
  - Headaches in people with HIV, cancer or at risk for blood clot
  - 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 over the counter (OTC) analgesics such as acetaminophen, or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as aspirin or ibuprofen.

✔ **What Caregivers can do to help their loved one with a Headache**
  - Gather a description your loved one’s pain and report to provider as appropriate
  - Immediately contact a medical provider to report Red Flag Symptoms noted above
  - Encourage loved one to try OTC analgesics if Red Flag Symptoms are not present