

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Chronic tension headache

Most people get headaches from time to time. But if you have chronic tension headache, you have a headache most days.

Chronic is a word doctors use to describe any medical condition that people live with for a long time. It doesn't mean that a condition is severe. In fact, tension headaches are usually fairly mild. They're a problem only because they happen so often.

We've looked at the best and most up-to-date research to produce this information. You can use it to talk to your doctor or pharmacist and decide which treatments are right for you.

What is chronic tension headache?

Tension headaches happen when you're feeling stressed, tired or angry. Some doctors think the pain is caused by tension in the muscles of your neck or your head. But other doctors don't think these headaches are caused by muscle tension at all. So they prefer to call them tension-type headaches.

If you have chronic tension headache, you get these headaches a lot. Doctors say you have chronic tension headache if you get tension headaches more than 15 days a month for at least three months. For some people, the pain never goes away completely.

Tension headaches are different from migraines. Migraine headaches can make you sensitive to light or noise, and make you feel sick or dizzy.

What are the symptoms?

A tension headache usually feels like an ordinary headache. Some people say it's as if a band is pressing on both sides of their head. Tension headaches don't tend to get worse if you move around. So doing something like climbing stairs shouldn't make you feel any worse.

What treatments work?

Things you can try yourself

People who regularly take **gentle exercise** are less likely to get tension headaches than people who don't. You could try walking, swimming, jogging or cycling.

You could also **keep a diary** of your headaches. This can help you spot the things that trigger your headaches, so you can avoid them. Being hungry, using a computer screen or being hunched over a desk can trigger a headache for some people.

Chronic tension headache

Drug treatments

Many people take **painkillers**, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, to help with the occasional tension headache. That's fine, but people with chronic tension headache get headaches 15 days a month or more. You shouldn't take painkillers this often. Taking painkillers more than two or three times a week can actually cause more headaches.

In one study, 75 in 100 people had fewer headaches when they cut down on painkillers. If you take painkillers regularly, talk to your doctor. They will be able to help you find another treatment.

The **antidepressant drugs** amitriptyline and mirtazapine (Zispin SolTab) can help with chronic tension headache. Taking one of these drugs regularly can mean you get fewer headaches. The headaches you do have should get better faster. Your doctor will start you on a low dose and increase it gradually. You'll probably take an antidepressant for about six months. After this time, your doctor may want to see how you get on without the drug. If your headaches come back, you'll be able to start treatment again.

Antidepressants can cause side effects. In one study:

- About 6 in 10 people who took amitriptyline felt sleepy
- About 5 in 10 people got a dry mouth
- About 2 in 10 people put on weight.

Another study found that mirtazapine was less likely to cause these side effects than amitriptyline.

Research has found that taking antidepressants can make some people, especially those under 18, more likely to think about suicide or self-harm. This is more likely in the early stages of your treatment, or if the dose of your antidepressant is changed. If you're taking an antidepressant and are worried about any thoughts or feelings you have, see your doctor straight away.

Tranquillisers are drugs that help you feel calm. There's been some research on a drug called diazepam for chronic tension headache. But researchers found diazepam caused only a small improvement, and it has serious side effects. You can get addicted, and it can make you drowsy, confused and forgetful.

Other treatments

Cognitive behaviour therapy is a talking treatment. It can be used to help people cope with stress. If your tension headaches are triggered by stress, therapy could help you feel better. There hasn't been much research, but one study found that about a third of people who had therapy got fewer or less severe headaches over six months.

Relaxation training and biofeedback are used to teach you how to relax the muscles of your head and neck. The idea is that learning to relax relieves the tension that might be triggering your headaches. In biofeedback, you wear an electrical device that tells you how tense your muscles are. When you relax, you get a signal, such as a beep. Eventually, you learn to relax by yourself.

Chronic tension headache

You won't have to take any drugs, but relaxation and biofeedback take up a lot of time. And there hasn't been much research to say whether they work.

Acupuncture is an ancient Chinese treatment. A trained acupuncturist puts thin, sterile needles into your skin. Some people try acupuncture because they don't want to take medicines. There have been some positive studies, but it's not certain whether this treatment works or not.

What will happen to me?

Tension headaches are usually fairly mild. But if they happen a lot, they may interfere with your work or your social life. Getting treatment can help.

Tension headaches tend to happen less often as people get older.

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