

Correcting Headaches Naturally

Forty-two million Americans consult physicians for headache relief each year. Tens of millions more seek remedies outside the doctor's office. Over 250,000,000 work days and \$25,000,000,000 are lost in job productivity due to headaches.

Headaches, like most other pain syndromes, are not so much problems in themselves that need simply to be relieved but warning signals identifying dysfunction in one or more of our bodily functions. Probably less than 5% of headache cases that reach a physician's attention are caused by serious brain lesions such as tumors, aneurysms, or infections. So, approximately 98% of all headaches are the result of problems that are best dealt with outside the arena of medical/surgical care.

The two major causes of headache are biochemical abnormalities and nerve-muscle-joint dysfunction. They overlap, as in the case of headaches caused by hypertension when part of the elevated blood pressure is due to too much salt in the diet and a "tense" lifestyle causing constricted blood vessels. Of all the causes most people experience headaches when several of these factors come into play. Remember, there is seldom ever just one cause to any health problem. The interrelatedness of life dictates that cause and effect relationships are usually complex.

So what do you do if you have a headache? Mindlessly mask these warning signals like the television ads and pharmaceutical companies want you to?

200,000 to 300,000 cases of gastrointestinal bleeding occurs each year causing an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 deaths due to the use of non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory pain medication like aspirin, acetaminophen, and ibuprofen.

Or rush off to a general practitioner's office fearing a brain tumor?

A wise, holistically-minded health care consumer will intelligently investigate the root causes and build a health enhancement program to address those parts of his life which are the most likely origin of the symptoms.

Headaches as a Sign of a Serious Emergency

To be safe we can prioritize those headaches that might need urgent medical attention by certain characteristics:

Head injury with or without loss of consciousness, plus any of the following symptoms several days after the injury: temperature elevated over 100 degrees F, double or blurred vision with dilated or unequally sized pupils, nausea, vomiting, confusion, convulsions, incoordination, loss of

bladder or bowel control, excessive drowsiness, or ear buzzing and ringing that is not brought about by high aspirin consumption. Contacting a physician or emergency room immediately is advised.

The headache began two to twenty-four weeks ago and has increased in intensity. It may be a fairly rapidly developing space occupying lesion or other medical emergency. If the severe pain of the same recent onset is accompanied by neck rigidity, it could be a serious subarachnoid hemorrhage; or if there is a fever it could be meningitis. If the pain is in one eye with blurred vision and halos around lights it could be acute glaucoma that needs immediate care. If you are over the age of 50 with a painful, tender temple accompanied by malaise, fever, inability to eat, and difficulty chewing there is the possibility of temporal arteritis which should be evaluated by your physician.

Non-Emergency Care

For moderate headaches or periodic recurrent ones like those of migraine, tension, post-concussion syndrome, stress, biochemical imbalance, high blood pressure, mild infections, or eye strain, which account for 98% of all headaches, approaches other than standard medical disease care are more likely to help.

Tension headaches are the most predominant type of head pain. For the problems of muscle tension that create these symptoms, it is not only important to alleviate the muscle tightness and the neurological disruption that accompanies it but also to address the perpetuating factors that drive the muscle into recurrent spasm. This can be seen as a two-fold approach--one working on the neuro-muscular structure and function, the other on the lifestyle stress.

Everyone has to evaluate and prioritize how much effort, time, and money needs to be spent on the different elements of lifestyle change involved in getting to the roots of these disturbances. Psychotherapy, biofeedback training, relaxation exercises, relationship work, occupational changes, and meditative practices have all proven to be valuable in the comprehensive treatment of headache. This is because of the powerful impact these factors can have on muscle tension levels.

Post-concussion syndrome (persistent headache, fatigue, personality aberrations, difficulty sleeping, memory and concentration deficits) that follows head injury or neck whiplash robs at least 2 million people of their normal function and health every year in the U.S. Motor vehicle accidents are by far the most common cause. Manipulative and physio-therapy rehabilitation is essential for complete recovery.

Neuro-musculo-skeletal Correction

Concerning the more immediate approaches to direct correction of the neuro-musculo-skeletal elements of the problem, many approaches are valuable:

1. Soft Tissue Manipulation
 - A. Deep Tissue Massage
 - B. Transverse Friction Massage
 - C. Spray and Stretch Technique
 - D. Proprioceptive Neuro-muscular Facilitation Technique (PNF)
Key muscles -- Posterior cervical, scalenes, trapezius, sternocleidomastoid, masseter, anterior temporalis, sub-occipital
2. Joint Manipulation
 - A. Spinal (particularly the neck)
 - B. Cranial
 - C. Extremity (occasionally shoulder restrictions)
3. Physical Therapy Modalities
 - A. Electrical Muscle Stimulation
 - B. Ultrasound
4. Meridian Therapy
 - A. Acupuncture
 - B. Micro-current stimulation of meridian points
 - C. Auriculo-therapy

Which combination of the above modalities is best suited for any particular individual is probably best decided in close consultation with quality, trusted, health care providers who deliver such services: osteopaths, chiropractors, physical therapists or acupuncturists

During this process of neuro-musculo-skeletal rehabilitation, exercise can play a key role in recovery as well as overall health enhancement. Strength, flexibility, aerobic conditioning, and coordination, all assist in muscular integrity that diminishes the chances of headaches arising out of these tissues. There are many opportunities for doing self care when soft tissue massage and stretching are major treatment components. The stress management elements of the problem are often crucial factors in the long term correction of headaches so use the our energy psychologist to really achieve the best results.

Sometimes the skill of a dentist who specializes in temporomandibular joint problems is called for when the above approaches are not sufficient to deal with them. But usually chiropractic manipulation, craniosacral work and therapeutic massage make dramatic changes in a short time. When eye strain is part of the cause for the headache an optometrist skilled in diagnostic techniques to identify stereoscopic tracking incoordination and one skilled in prescribing visual exercise might be best to consult with. Often corrective lenses are in order.

Biochemical Causes

1. Allergy
 - A. pollens, dust, molds, dander
 - B. inhalant chemicals, "sick building syndrome"
 - C. food, MSG, aspartame
2. Toxic Substances
 - A. formaldehyde
 - B. mercury dental amalgam
 - C. toxic bowel syndrome
 - D. chemical exposure (ie. pesticides, industrial solvents)
3. Dietary Indiscretion
 - A. caffeine intake and withdrawal
 - B. hypoglycemia (low blood sugar)
 - C. vaso-active amine consumption: (ie. tyramine, phenylethylamine, chocolate, cheese, alcohol)
4. Nutritional Imbalance
 - A. hypocalcemia (low calcium in the blood)
 - B. deficiency of vitamins B1, B2, B3, or magnesium
 - C. excessive vitamin A, D, or zinc
5. Biochemical abnormalities that can be corrected without drugs or surgery
 - A. hypothyroidism (low thyroid function)
 - B. anemia
 - C. mild infections such as sinusitis, colds
 - D. premenstrual syndrome
 - E. brain neurotransmitter imbalances

These are some of the more frequent biochemical causes of headache. If there is a suspicion that recurrent headaches occur in a pattern due to exposure to different foods or are related to certain environments or seasons, more detailed testing should be done to verify this likelihood. The simplest are symptom diaries that one can then correlate to food consumption or location. These are usually difficult and inaccurate since allergic reactions can occur as much as 72 hours after exposure. Elimination diets are a bit more accurate but still involve inconvenience and interpretive grey areas. IgE RAST testing for inhalants of all kinds and ELISA/ACT testing for foods is the most accurate and cost effective method of allergy testing to date. Serammune Diagnostic Lab (800-553-5472) is one of the most comprehensive for these evaluations. In addition they can evaluate, reactivity other types of environmental contaminants which may be problematic. LEAP testing measures the mediator release from a complex reaction that occurs to foods or food additives and is currently our preferred test for migraine and irritable bowel sufferers.

Toxic bowel syndrome might be suspected if malodorous stools and flatulence is a problem. Testing can be done at a holistic physician's office who uses a comprehensive stool and digestive analysis or a similar

diagnostic panel. Correction usually involves bowel detoxification, improved diet, and nutritional supplements which include healthy forms of *Lactobacillus acidophilus*.

Migraine

Caffeine intake and withdrawal are well known causes of headaches. Simple solution: no caffeine. Erratic blood sugar levels from poor dietary practices is also a very frequent cause of headaches. Using the nutritional guidelines in the section on Nutrition will solve most hypoglycemic (low blood sugar) problems. Allergies also cause hypoglycemia, so that has to be considered in addition, particularly food allergies. Some people react to vaso-active amines like phenylethylamine that is found in chocolate. Some professionals consider this to be an allergic type reaction or food intolerance. By whatever name they go by, or by whatever method of identification is needed, find these irritative substances and eliminate them from the diet.

Nutrient levels can cause headaches also. On rare occasions excessively large and prolonged intake of supplemental A, D, or zinc can elicit a headache. A simple test and simple solution---a trial vacation from these supplements will bring quick relief. Much more frequent, though, is nutrient deficiency, particularly magnesium deficiency in cases of migraine headache. Since testing for nutrient deficiency is expensive and has variable reliability, often a more cost-effective approach is to take a high potency multi-vitamin and multi-mineral supplement for a six month trial period.

For migrainers 600-800 mg of magnesium malate per day decreases the frequency, intensity and duration of headaches. This is particularly so with hormonally triggered migraines in women around their menstrual cycles. These often require 1500mg per day. The herb, Feverfew, has also proved successful in reducing the severity of attacks. The usual dose 50-80 mg of the freeze dried leaves containing .4%-.66% of the active ingredient, parthenolide, per day. It usually takes 4-6 weeks to take effect. Butterber is another herb that has shown efficacy in combating migraines.

Neurotransmitter imbalance within the brain can be corrected with cranial electrical stimulation from a battery operated TENS-like device. This can frequently eliminate the need for medication.

There is a wide variety of biochemical abnormalities which can cause headaches. The vast majority can be dealt with by natural holistic approaches, not medical or surgical ones. Finding a good holistic physician to help might be indicated, but much can be done with self care.

In our office the use of the Hinz method to reorganize the brain chemistry combined with allergy or LEAP testing if that proves to be a problem area

is our preferred method. Mixed headaches require a team effort with manipulations, massage, acupuncture, psychotherapy and other team members selectively chosen after an appropriate examination.

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