

Pain Insights

Courtesy of Joe De Santi, M.D.

HEADACHE

Most people have experienced a headache in their lifetime. Some headaches can be activity related, following exercise or sex, and some can be hormonally related like those seen during a woman's menstrual cycle. In general, a headache is any unpleasant, ongoing pain located anywhere in the head. Most people experience a "typical headache", which for them means it is in the same location as previous headaches. Occasionally headaches can be new, which should raise suspicion of a possibly more serious issue. Headaches that follow an injury should always raise concern.

Many theories of headache have been proposed. Some believe headaches are a vascular phenomenon in the blood vessels in the lining of the brain. Since the brain itself does not sense pain, it is the structures around the brain that signal pain. Another theory believes it is a loss of neurological regulation in the brain that results in faulty signals and the perception of pain. Evidence would suggest that it is a combination of both processes to some degree.

Muscle tension headaches and migraine headaches are believed to be on a continuum. Many sources believe that people predisposed to one type of headache may be at risk for another type. This is sometimes true but not always the case. Many times people experience a component of several types of headache which is why everyone's experience with headache is uniquely different.

Management of headache can be as simple as using an over the counter medication for relief. Some headaches, however, require prescription medication for prevention and control. In rare instances, opioid medication may be needed but this is often a last resort. Opioid medications, also known as narcotics, are extremely potent medications. The problem is that they can become habit forming, require higher doses to be effective, and ironically have headache as a side effect.

The best prevention for a headache is to know what precipitates your headache. Obviously, if you know what causes your headache try to avoid those situations whenever possible. The best treatment will vary from person to person but always consult a physician if your headache has changed significantly or is new.