

Healthy Living

Patient Information from the American Chiropractic Association

Headaches and Chiropractic

If you have a headache, you're not alone. Nine out of ten Americans suffer from headaches. Some are occasional, some frequent, some are dull and throbbing, and some cause debilitating pain and nausea.

What do you do when you suffer from a pounding headache? Do you grit your teeth and carry on? Lie down? Pop a pill and hope the pain goes away? There is a better alternative.

New research shows that spinal manipulation – the primary form of care provided by doctors of chiropractic – may be an effective treatment option for tension headaches and headaches that originate in the neck.

A report released in 2001 by researchers at the Duke University Evidence-Based Practice Center in Durham, NC, found that spinal manipulation resulted in almost immediate improvement for those headaches that originate in the neck, and had significantly fewer side effects and longer-lasting relief of tension-type headache than a commonly prescribed medication.

Also, a 1995 study in the *Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics* found that spinal manipulative therapy is an effective treatment for tension headaches and that those who ceased chiropractic treatment after four weeks experienced a sustained therapeutic benefit in contrast with those patients who received a commonly prescribed medication.

Headache Triggers

Headaches have many causes, or “triggers.” These may include foods, environmental stimuli (noises, lights, stress, etc.) and/or behaviors (insomnia, excessive exercise, blood sugar changes, etc.). About 5 percent of all headaches are warning signals caused by physical problems.



Ninety-five percent of headaches are primary headaches, such as tension, migraine, or cluster headaches. These types of headaches are not caused by disease. The headache itself is the primary concern.

“The greatest majority of primary headaches are associated with muscle tension in the neck,” says Dr. George B. McClelland, a doctor of chiropractic from Christiansburg, VA. “Today, Americans engage in more sedentary activities than they used to, and more hours are spent in one fixed position or posture. This can increase joint irritation and muscle tension in the neck, upper back and scalp, causing your head to ache.”

What Can You Do?

The ACA suggests the following:

- If you spend a large amount of time in one fixed position, such as in front of a computer, on a sewing machine, typing or reading, take a break and stretch every 30 minutes to one

hour. The stretches should take your head and neck through a comfortable range of motion.

- Low-impact exercise may help relieve the pain associated with primary headaches. However, if you are prone to dull, throbbing headaches, avoid heavy exercise. Engage in such activities as walking and low-impact aerobics.
- Avoid teeth clenching. The upper teeth should never touch the lowers, except when swallowing. This results in stress at the temporomandibular joints (TMJ) – the two joints that connect your jaw to your skull – leading to TMJ irritation and a form of tension headaches.
- Drink at least eight 8-ounce glasses of water a day to help avoid dehydration, which can lead to headaches.

What Can a Doctor of Chiropractic Do?

Dr. McClelland says your doctor of chiropractic may do one or more of the following if you suffer from a primary headache:

- Perform spinal manipulation or chiropractic adjustments to improve spinal function and alleviate the stress on your system.
- Provide nutritional advice, recommending a change in diet and perhaps the addition of B complex vitamins.
- Offer advice on posture, ergonomics (work postures), exercises and relaxation techniques. This advice should help to relieve the recurring joint irritation and tension in the muscles of the neck and upper back.

“Doctors of chiropractic undergo extensive training to help their patients in many ways – not just back pain,” says Dr. McClelland. “They know how tension in the spine relates to problems in other parts of the body, and they can take steps to relieve those problems.”

Avoid the Following Food “Triggers”

- Avoid caffeine. Foods such as chocolate, coffee, sodas and cocoa contain high levels of the stimulant.
- Avoid foods with a high salt or sugar content. These foods may cause migraines, resulting in sensitivity to light, noise or abrupt movements.
- Avoid drinking alcoholic beverages. These drinks can dehydrate you and cause headache pain.
- Other headache sufferers may want to avoid not only caffeine, but also high-protein foods, dairy products, red meat and salty foods.

Chiropractic Care Can Help

Talk to your doctor of chiropractic about other ways to improve your lifestyle. Doctors of chiropractic are trained and licensed to examine and treat the entire body with specific emphasis on the nervous and musculoskeletal systems. They can also help people lead healthier lives by focusing on wellness and prevention.■



For more information on prevention and wellness, or to find a doctor of chiropractic near you, visit ACA's website at www.acatoday.org/patients.