

Tension headaches are the most common type of headache. These headaches may occur on 15 days out of a month (chronic) or less often (episodic).

## Frequent Signs and Symptoms

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- Dull, steady pain on both sides of the head. The pain may be mild to severe. It usually comes on gradually.
- Tight feeling or tenderness in the muscles of the head, neck, or scalp. "Like a band around the head."
- Some people may clench their teeth.
- Tension headaches are different from migraines, which cause intense pain, usually on one side of the head. Migraines also cause nausea and light sensitivity.

## Causes

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The cause is not clearly understood. It now appears that it is caused by a problem of the central nervous system and changes in brain chemicals. It has been thought the cause was stress and tension that puts strain on the muscles of the neck, scalp, face, and jaw. There are other possible causes being studied also.

## Risk Increases With

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People who might get tension headaches:

- Women (more often affected than men).
- Those who are overworked on a continuous basis.
- Persons with chronic poor posture.
- Those with sleep disorders.
- Individuals that suffer from depression, stress, or anxiety.
- Certain chronic medical problems.
- Abuse of alcohol or other substances.

Things that might bring on (trigger) a tension headache include:

- A stressful event
- Eating certain foods
- Not eating on time; caffeine withdrawal
- Intense physical exercise
- Taking certain drugs
- Hormone changes in women
- Eyestrain

- Fatigue
- Having a cold or the flu

## Preventive Measures

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Avoid any of the risk factors when possible.

## Expected Outcomes

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Most tension headaches can be relieved with treatment, and do not disrupt home or work activities.

## Possible Complications

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- None expected for a simple headache.
- Chronic tension headaches may require trying several types of treatment. The headaches may continue if the risk factors are not changed or treated.

## General Measures

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- Self-care includes mild pain relievers. If possible, stop what you are doing and try to relax. Take a hot bath or shower. Lie down. Place a warm or cold cloth, whichever feels better, over the aching area.
- Self-care is often effective for handling the headache. If that doesn't work, or the pain gets worse, or headaches occur often, see your health care provider.
- Your health care provider will do a physical exam, and ask questions about your symptoms and your lifestyle. Medical tests and blood studies may be done to make sure there is no other medical problem involved.
- Chronic tension headaches may be treated with different methods for stress reduction and relaxation techniques, and prescribed drugs. Drugs that have been overused for headache pain may need to be withdrawn.
- There are more treatment options that you and your health care provider may discuss. These may include physical therapy, hypnosis, massage therapy, and others.

To learn more: National Headache Foundation, 820 N. Orleans, Suite 217, Chicago, IL 60610; (888) 643-5552; website: [www.headaches.org](http://www.headaches.org).



## Medications

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- You may take over-the-counter pain relievers such as ibuprofen, naproxen, aspirin, or acetaminophen.
- Stronger drugs, for pain, and drugs to prevent chronic tension headaches may be prescribed.

## Activity

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- Exercise on a regular basis and get enough sleep.

## Diet

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- Eat a healthy diet high in fiber, fruits, and vegetables.

**Notify the office if** you or a family member has tension headaches, and self-treatment steps are not working. New symptoms are caused by adverse drug reaction.