

Tension-Type Headaches - A Summary

Sometimes tension-type headaches develop more frequently than usual, often during times of stress. Below are ten tips which may help you to deal with tension-type headaches.

Relaxation. Different people find different things helpful. A walk, some exercise, or simply taking a break from the normal routine may help. A massage of your shoulders and neck muscles may be helpful. A hot flannel put on your neck or a warm bath may help.

Painkillers such as paracetamol usually work well. It may be best to take painkillers as soon as a headache starts to develop. This may 'ward off' the headache better than treating it after it has fully developed. You can take a second dose of paracetamol after four hours if necessary.

Anti-inflammatory painkillers are alternatives. For example, ibuprofen which you can buy at pharmacies, but you need a prescription for other types. Anti-inflammatory painkillers may be more effective than paracetamol. However, some people develop side-effects such as stomach problems. Always read the leaflet which comes with the medicine packet.

Diary. It may be useful to keep a diary if you have frequent headaches. Note when, where, how bad, and how long each headache lasts. Also note anything that may have caused it. A pattern may emerge and you may find a 'trigger'. For example, hunger, anxiety, bad neck posture, eye strain, stress, or emotion. You may be able to avoid situations that trigger your headaches.

Bad posture, particularly sitting at a desk for long periods, may cause tension on the neck muscles and lead to a headache. Is this a possibility? Can it be corrected?

Poor eyesight can make you squint when you read and cause tension of the muscles around the eye. This may lead to headaches. An eye test from an optometrist may be a good idea.

Stress is a common trigger for headaches. Learning to cope with stress and to relax may help. Breathing or relaxation exercises may ease anxiety in stressful situations, and prevent possible headaches. There are plenty of books and tapes which can teach you how to relax.

Regular exercise. On average, tension-type headaches are more common in people who do not take much exercise compared to those who do. If you do not do much exercise, it may be worth trying regular exercise like brisk walking, jogging, cycling, swimming, etc. It is not clear how exercise helps. It may be that exercise helps to ease stress and tension which can have a knock-on effect of reducing headaches.

Depression can lead to frequent headaches. Tell a doctor if you think you are depressed.

See a doctor:

- if you take painkillers on most days for headaches. Sometimes painkillers are the **cause** of headaches if you take them on most days. This is because, if the body becomes too used to painkillers, a 'withdrawal' headache may occur if you do **not** take painkillers each day.
- if you have frequent headaches. A medicine to prevent the headaches may be advised. These are different to painkillers and have to be taken each day.
- if you think your headaches are not the common 'tension-type' headache.