

# Headaches

Headaches are a common health complaint in women.

## Signs, Symptoms, and Causes

### For Tension or Muscular Headaches

- A dull ache in your forehead, above your ears, or at the back of your head.
- Pain in your neck or shoulders.

Common causes are tense or tight muscles in the face, neck, or scalp, concentrating hard for long periods of time, stress, and lack of sleep.



*Most headaches are caused by tension.*

### For Sinus Headaches

- Pain in your forehead, cheekbones, and nose. The pain is worse in the morning.
- Increased pain when you bend over or touch your face.
- Stuffy nose.

A sinus headache occurs when fluids in the nose aren't able to drain well and a buildup of pressure occurs in the sinuses. A cold, allergies, dirty or polluted water, and airplane travel can cause a sinus headache.

### For Migraine Headaches

- One side of your head hurts more than the other.
- You feel sick to your stomach or vomit.
- Light hurts your eyes. Noise bothers you. The headache is worse with activity.
- After the headache, some people have a drained feeling with tired, aching muscles; others feel great.

Migraines can occur with or without an aura. With an aura, spots or flashing lights or numbness occur 10 to 30 minutes before the headache. Ten percent of all migraines are this type; 90% occur without an aura.

Migraine headaches happen when blood vessels in your head open too wide or close too tight. They tend to run in families and affect nearly 30% of women at some time during their lives. They occur more often in women than in men.

Migraines occur less often during pregnancy (especially the second half) and often disappear during menopause. Some women, though, may get migraines for the first time during menopause.

Certain things trigger migraine headaches:

- Changing hormone levels. Menstruation.
- Use of birth control pills or the patch.
- Change in sleeping patterns.
- Stress.
- Aged cheeses. Cured meats. Red wines.

### Other Causes of Headaches

- Analgesic rebound from regular or repeated use of over-the-counter or prescribed pain relievers.
- Eating or drinking something very cold, such as ice cream. {**Note:** To prevent ice cream headaches, warm the ice cream for a few seconds in the front of your mouth.}
- Caffeine withdrawal.
- Low blood sugar, hunger, or sensitivity to certain foods and drinks. (See box on next page.)

# Headaches, continued

- A symptom of a health problem. Examples are allergies, depression, high blood pressure, dental problems, and a pinched nerve in the neck.
- Cigarette smoke, pollution, etc.
- Uncorrected vision problems.

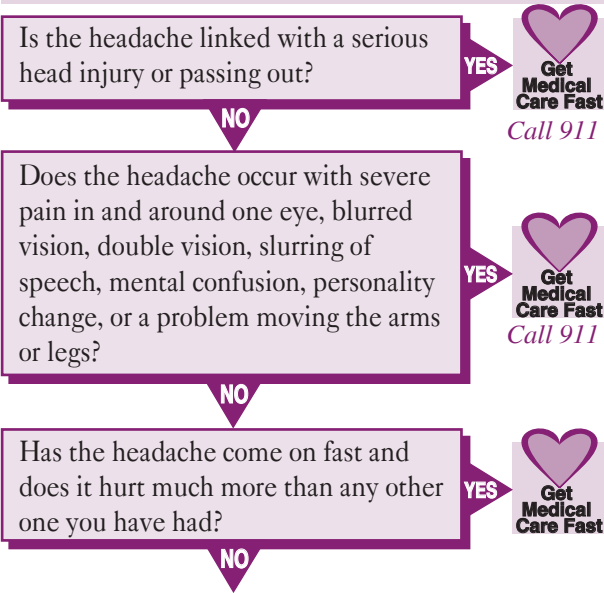
## Treatment

Self-care can treat headaches caused by tension, fatigue, and/or stress. Certain over-the-counter medicines and prescribed medicines can treat sinus headaches and migraine headaches.

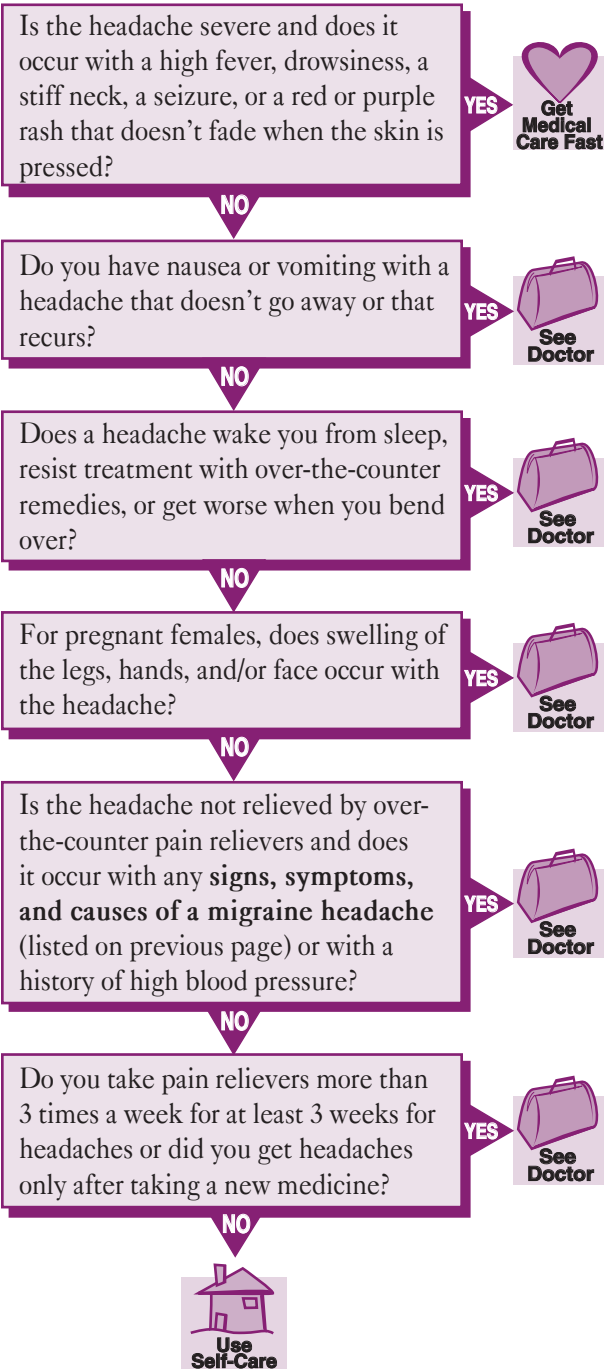
Biofeedback has helped many people who have suffered from headaches.

Headaches that are symptoms of health problems are relieved when the condition is treated with success.

## Questions to Ask



Flowchart continued in next column



See Self-Care / Prevention on next page

Self-Care / Prevention

- Don't smoke. If you smoke, quit!
- Try to stop the headache when it starts.
- Take an over-the-counter (OTC) medicine for pain as directed on the label.
- Rest in a quiet, dark room with your eyes closed.
- Massage the back of your neck with your thumbs. Work from the ears toward the center of the back of your head. Also, rub gently along the sides of your eyes. Gently rub your shoulders, neck, and jaw. Get a massage.
- Place a cold or warm washcloth or hot or cold pack, whichever feels better, over the area that aches.
- Take a warm bath or shower.
- Relax. Picture a calm scene in your head. Meditate or breathe deeply.
- Keep a diary of when, where, and why headaches occur.
- Exercise on a regular basis.
- Get enough rest.
- Eat 5 to 6 small meals instead of 3 large meals. To ward off low blood sugar, don't skip meals. Avoid sweets.
- Keep regular sleeping times as much as you can.
- When lying down, use a pillow that supports the neck. Sleep on your back.



*Massage the back of your neck.*

- Avoid scents, foods, and beverages that trigger headaches.

Foods and Drinks that May Cause Headaches

Alcoholic beverage, especially red wine
Aspartame (the artificial sweetener in NutraSweet®)
Bananas (if more than 1/2 banana a day)
Caffeine from coffee, tea, cola soft drinks, chocolate, or some medications
Lack of caffeine if abruptly stopped, such as stopping coffee intake
Citrus fruits (if more than 1/2 cup a day)
Cured meats, such as frankfurters
Food additives, such as monosodium glutamate (MSG)
Hard cheeses, such as aged cheddar or provolone
Nuts and peanut butter
Onions
Sour cream
Soy sauce
Vinegar

- To help prevent headaches and nausea caused by a hangover, try an OTC product, such as Chaser–Freedom From Hangovers.
- For a hangover: After drinking alcohol, take an OTC pain reliever. Eat solid foods. Rest or sleep. Have 2 or more glasses of water before you go to sleep. Drink 2 or more glasses of water when you wake up.

For Information, Contact:

National Headache Foundation  
888.NHF.5552 (643.5552)  
[www.headaches.org](http://www.headaches.org)