

Tension headache

What is a tension headache?

A tension headache is a headache that feels like pressure or tension in and around the head. It is the most common type of headache. It is common for most people to have at least one tension headache in their lifetime.

Some people have tension headaches only once or twice a year, while others may have frequent or even daily headaches. Despite the discomfort, most people can continue with their usual activities.

What causes a tension headache?

There are many reasons why people get tension headaches. They can be triggered by one or more of the following:

- Tension and stress
- Tiredness
- Long periods of reading, typing or concentration (eye strain)
- Poor posture
- Spine and neck injuries
- Physical or emotional stress

What are the symptoms?

A tension headache may feel like a tight band around the head, a dull ache on both sides of the head or a heavy weight on top of the head.

There may also be aching and tightness in the neck and shoulders.

Tension headaches may become worse as the day goes on.

Treatment

You will be assessed by a doctor and advised of the best treatment. Tests are usually not needed. You may find that pain relief can reduce the severity of a tension headache, but the headache may not go away completely. Pain relief is safe when used as directed – ask your doctor what is best for you. Pain medication such as paracetamol or ibuprofen may help. In some people, physiotherapy, acupuncture or massage may help.

If you suffer from frequent or continued headaches it is important to return for further review with a doctor. You may need further tests or specialist referral. A headache may be a warning sign of a more serious problem, but this is rare.

Writing your symptoms in a headache diary can help in working out both a prevention and a treatment plan.

Home care

When you have the headache, take pain relief and rest. Sometimes having a warm bath or shower or applying a heat pack over the aching area can help. Heat packs can be applied for up to 20 minutes every hour, as needed. Check your skin after five minutes; if a rash or irritation occurs, remove the heat bag.

You should not rely solely on pain medication. The most effective long-term treatment is to make simple lifestyle changes that reduce the frequency of your headaches.

Be guided by your doctor or healthcare professional, but some helpful tips include the following:

- Learn ways to manage your stress
- Find ways to relax, such as yoga, massage or meditation
- Have a healthy diet
- Drink plenty of water
- Exercise regularly – you release ‘feel good’ chemicals (endorphins) from your brain when you exercise
- Maintain a good posture when you are upright. Try not to slouch when sitting because this puts strain on the neck and back muscles.

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor’s fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

PATIENT INFORMATION

Seek prompt medical attention if:

- You get a headache that is severe and 'out of the blue' (a sudden onset)
- You are generally unwell, including fever, stiff neck or vomiting
- You have a seizure
- The pain is worse when you cough, sneeze or strain
- The pain is getting worse, despite taking pain relief
- The pain is worse when you lie down
- You become drowsy or confused
- Your vision becomes blurred, you have double-vision or any other visual disturbance

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on (03) 9508 1500
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au