

HEADACHE

It is often quoted that on any one day 5 million people in the UK experience a headache. How this is measured has never been clear but certainly headache is one of the commonest symptoms we humans suffer from. Mostly we accept headaches as part of life and apart from a few very lucky individuals we all tend to get them from time to time.

Concern arises when they are very frequent or severe or when they start to affect our quality of life. Very occasionally they are due to a serious medical condition although in reality this is rare. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to convince a person with a pounding headache that there is nothing to worry about. For this reason, many people feel they need to seek medical advice if they have the symptom.

Common Types of Headache

Tension Headaches

Recently renamed tension-type, this is probably the commonest type of headache and certainly more headaches will be ascribed to this category than any other, including what might be called 'everyday headaches'.

Most people describe this type of headache in terms of dull pressure or a feeling of tension and tightening around the head, often spreading to the neck area. The traditional view was that increased muscle tension played an important part but recent research has failed to find any clear evidence for this and latest opinions favour an explanation based on changes in brain chemistry. It is probably true to say that a headache will probably be labelled tension-type if no other cause can be found, which is not entirely satisfactory.

There is general agreement that tension-type headaches are invariably bilateral, which means that they don't just occur on one side of the head, and that they are unlikely to be associated with nausea or vomiting. They are usually of mild to moderate intensity, non-pulsating and most sufferers are able to continue with their usual daily activities. It is said that they rarely start during sleep. Otherwise there may not be any features which are consistently specific.

It is said that tension-type headache occurs most frequently in the 20-50 age group and that 90% of women and 70% of men will experience this kind of headache at some time in their lives. Most headaches of this type last no more than 24 hours and often only a few hours, but, as always, there are exceptions and some individual have attacks lasting as long as a week.

The causes of tension-type headache are myriad, ranging from stress of all kinds, anxiety, working or concentrating for long periods in one position, eyestrain, poor posture, visual and auditory overstimulation from bright lights or loud noises, lack of sleep, hunger due to delayed or irregular meals, jaw clenching, use of alcohol and caffeine etc., etc. Of all these, stress seems to be the commonest trigger.

Chronic tension headache

This is a more severe subtype of tension headache, sometimes referred to as chronic daily headache. Typically sufferers have a headache on at least 15 days each month and the frequency may increase until the headache occurs daily. The cause of this condition is not clear. In some people it simply evolves from the more common episodic headache until it occurs most days. In others there seems to be an overlap with migraine and the headaches become more debilitating in their effects. Some researchers have speculated that there may be a genetic factor, but, as in the more common episodic tension-type headaches, psychological factors such as stress, anxiety, depression and sleep disturbance appear to be the most potent triggers. In recent years support has gathered for the view that overuse of painkillers can, paradoxically, be a factor in generating the headaches.

Understandably, people who suffer from a headache on most days often worry that there may be a serious underlying cause, and chronic tension headache is probably the type which most often requires further investigations.