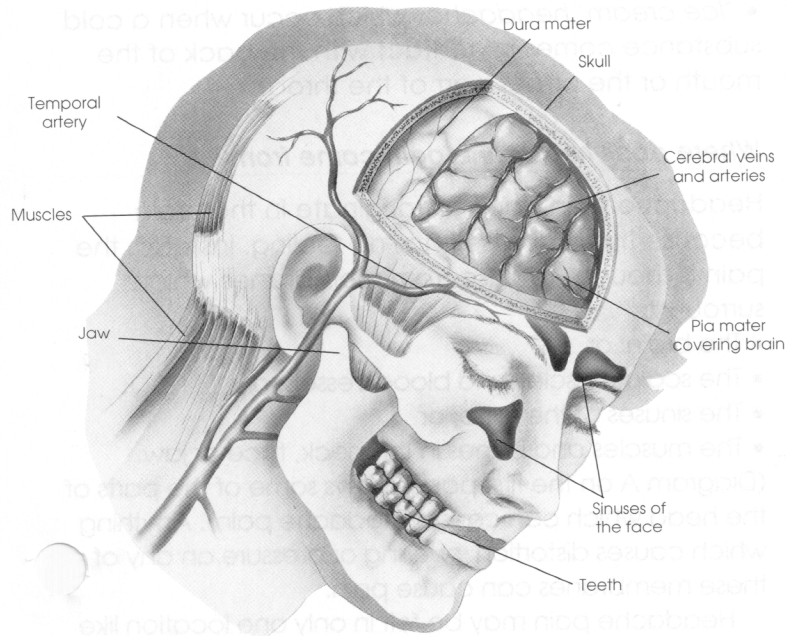


# TENSION HEADACHE



**Diagram A:** *Muscles and bones in the face, neck and jaw*

## ***What are tension headaches?***

Almost everyone has had a headache at some time in their life. Of the different kinds of headaches, tension headaches are the most common. The pain from tension headaches is usually mild to moderate. There is no single standard pain location for tension headaches. It may be a sensation of tightness or pressure across the forehead, on both sides of the head, at the back of the neck and even extending to the shoulders. People who suffer from tension headaches have reported that it feels like a tight band is around their head or that a heavy weight is sitting on top of their head.

Tension headaches which occur infrequently are usually not a cause for concern and the pain may be relieved with some of the treatment options listed in this brochure. For some people, however, tension headaches occur every day. These headaches are also known as *chronic daily headaches*.

Other types of tension headaches include:

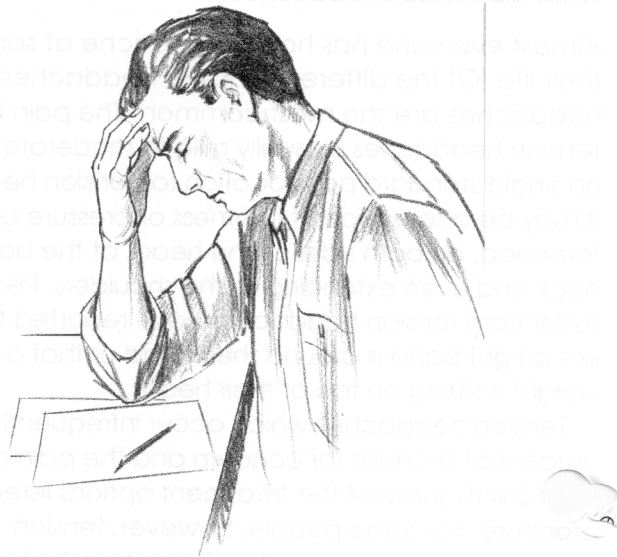
- *Exertional headaches and cough headaches* which can be caused by sudden strenuous physical effort, such as moving a heavy object or coughing for a long time; and
- *"Ice cream" headaches* which occur when a cold substance comes in contact with the back of the mouth or the upper part of the throat.

### ***Where does headache pain come from?***

Headache pain does not originate in the brain because the brain itself has no feeling. Instead, the pain is thought to arise from membranes which surround:

- The brain; or
  - The scalp muscles and blood vessels; or
  - The sinuses of the face; or
  - The muscles and bones in the neck, face or jaw.
- (Diagram A on the first page shows some of the parts of the head which can cause headache pain). Anything which causes distortion, swelling or pressure on any of these membranes can cause pain.

Headache pain may be felt in only one location like the forehead or the back of the neck, or it may be felt all over. It may be throbbing or sharp and deep. Sometimes the pain will move to a different part of the head during the headache. Some people may also have nausea and vomiting when they have a headache.



**Diagram B:** Tension headaches are often caused by poor posture. For example, sitting hunched over a desk for long periods of time.

## **POSSIBLE CAUSES OF TENSION HEADACHES**

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Emotional stress  
Poor posture (e.g., sitting hunched over a desk for long periods of time)  
Eyestrain (e.g., looking at a printed page too closely or in dim light)  
Noise  
Odors (e.g., perfume, tobacco)  
Weather changes

### ***What causes tension headaches?***

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Headaches are caused by different things. Tension headaches, as the name suggests, are caused by tension or pressure to the membranes of the head. Tension headaches are often caused by a tensing of the scalp, neck and related muscles. For example, clenching the jaw, or squinting your eyes in bright sunlight. Poor posture is another common cause. Tension headaches often occur as a result of emotional stress. Some possible causes of tension headaches are listed in the chart on this page.

### ***Other types of headaches***

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Although tension headaches are the most common kind of headache, another type is the *cluster headache*, where the pain is usually severe and is often felt behind one eye. These headaches may occur for a period of time, then disappear, only to recur months later.

Many people, especially women, suffer from *migraine headaches*. Some people with these headaches also have nausea or vomiting and may be bothered by light and sound. People who suffer from migraines often have tension headaches as well.

Other headaches include those with a more serious underlying cause such as a brain tumor or blood clot. If you have a very severe headache which starts suddenly or lasts for a long time without a known cause, it is important that you see your doctor as soon as possible.

### ***Treatment options***

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Preventing headaches is as important as treatment. Many headaches can be avoided, especially if you know what can cause your headache. Avoiding the

factors which can cause headaches can help reduce the incidence and severity of headache pain. To help your doctor correctly diagnose your headaches, it is helpful to take note of:

- When the headache started and how long it lasted;
- How severe the pain was;
- What the pain was like (e.g., throbbing, aching etc.);
- What you were doing before the headache started.

Your doctor will help you decide which of the following treatment options is best for you.

**Non-drug treatments.** For many people, simply lying down in a quiet place for a while will relieve a headache. Others may try a cool washcloth on the forehead or back of the neck. Additional ideas include a warm bath or stretching and massaging the muscles in the shoulders, neck and scalp. For tension headaches, relaxation is very important. Try this technique to help you relax:

1. Lie down. Close your eyes.
2. Concentrate on the muscles in your lower legs; first tighten them for 20 seconds; feel the tightness in the muscles, and then let go and relax them, slowly and steadily. Rest in the relaxed state for 20 to 30 seconds.
3. Perform the same procedure with other areas of your body, one at a time, slowly moving up along your body: thighs, buttocks, stomach, chest, shoulders, neck, jaw and forehead.
4. Lie still for several minutes, letting your thoughts float.

Other relaxation exercises may include listening to soothing music or yoga.

**Drug treatments.** Most headaches can be made better with ASA or other pain relievers. If your headaches are frequent, your doctor may prescribe nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) which will help reduce the pain caused by swelling of the membranes.

Whatever the treatment, it is important to follow your doctor's advice and directions carefully to treat your headache pain successfully.