

Your Health Reference Sheet

Topic: Headaches

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Headaches are one of the most common complaints that cause people to seek medical attention. In fact, over 50 million Americans suffer from chronic headaches, and approximately 28 million of them suffer from migraine headaches. While headaches tend to be straightforward in the symptoms they create, treating them isn't as straightforward. The reason for this is two-fold. First, many doctors still think that headaches are psychological rather than physiological, so they dismiss many of the things that people say. Doctors don't understand that headaches are biological in origin, so if they're to treat headaches effectively, they have to discover what triggers them and then eliminate the triggers. This means looking at a variety of factors such as: is there a family history of chronic headaches; is the person stressed, and to what degree are they stressed; do they have allergies; is there a hormone imbalance; and, do they have weather sensitivities, as well as looking at other well-known headache triggers. This process can be hit and miss, especially in the beginning, and frustrating for both the doctor and the patient. The second reason is that headaches don't fit into a neat, tidy diagnostic box. They come in a variety of forms and create varying degrees of discomfort, so just diagnosing someone with a headache isn't enough. The problem with headaches is that there are as many different forms of headaches as there are headache sufferers.

General Description

The biological cause of headaches is a chemistry change in the body due to stress, pH and hormone imbalances, and a deficiency in the neurotransmitter serotonin. This serotonin deficiency changes the functioning of the blood vessels, the activities of pain receptors, and other elements in the brain that rely on serotonin for its activities. This single deficiency can produce a variety of headaches. The two most common are *tension* headaches and *migraine* headaches.

Headaches are produced when there's a vascular change such as dilation or a constriction of the blood vessels, or when nerve endings in the head and neck become irritated due to tight muscles.

Different Forms of Headaches

Headaches come in a variety of forms and can be categorized by their symptoms. The various forms of headaches include:

- **Simple Headaches** – The symptoms include hammering, buzzing, and pulsing in the top of the head. The causes of simple headaches are stress, sensitivity to weather, high blood pressure, lack of oxygen to the brain, and certain infectious diseases.
- **Tension Headaches** – The symptoms include dull, oppressive pain, tension in the back of the head, knots in the neck muscles and shoulders, and pulsing in the temples of the head. Tension headaches will begin in the shoulders, move up to the back of the head, and then move forward to the forehead. It will usually affect both sides of the head. The causes of tension headaches are muscular tension, spinal misalignment, and constricted blood vessels.
- **Cluster Headaches** – The symptoms include piercing and burning pain in the head; a single, watery red eye (one side of the face); nasal congestion; and a flushed face. The pain is usually isolated to one side of the head or the other, and the pain will always be in the same place. Typically, cluster headaches begin shortly after a person falls asleep and are sometimes preceded by a mild aching sensation on one side of the head. These headaches can last from 30 minutes to two hours. They can appear, diminish, and disappear completely, only to reoccur later in the day. Some people experience a barrage of cluster headaches on a daily or weekly basis and then won't have them again for several months or even years. Men are more prone to cluster headaches due to testosterone imbalances. When women get cluster headaches, it's due to a deficiency in serotonin.
- **Migraine Headaches** – The symptoms include oppressive pain, usually on one side of the head only; throbbing pain; nausea; vomiting; vision problems; very cold hands; dizziness; seeing auras; and oversensitivity to sound and lights. The causes of migraine headaches include the genetic factor of a deficiency in serotonin, food reactions, allergies, hormone imbalances, low blood sugar, pH imbalances, and dilated blood vessels. Migraine headaches are the most debilitating of all of the different forms of headaches because they can last for a few hours or for three days, and usually require bed rest.
- **Sinus Headaches** – The symptoms include dull, throbbing pain in the brow area and behind the eyes, dull pain in the cheeks and nasal area, and