

CLUW News Health Tip

UNDERSTANDING HEADACHES

Almost everyone has had a headache at some time or other. Headaches are the most common pain experienced by human beings. Occasional headaches that are relieved by rest or over-the-counter medications are not a great concern. But headaches can be frequent and severe and interfere with normal, daily activities.

The most common headaches are classified as tension-type headaches. When they occur several times a week, persons may consume too many over-the-counter pain relievers in ever increasing amounts. Medical evaluation may be needed to treat their underlying anxiety or depression.

About 28 million Americans suffer from migraines. According to Dr. Seymour Diamond of the Diamond Headache Clinic in Chicago, the economic cost of migraines is high – 150 million days are lost from work or school in the United States and \$13 billion is lost in productivity each year. Migraines are severe headaches that at one time were believed to be caused solely by swelling of the blood vessels of the brain. Recent research has also shown that during a migraine there is a spread of nervous activity in the brain where pain centers are located. Pain begins at one side of the head and may radiate to the entire head and neck. Nausea, vomiting and sensitivity to light often occur. There is a family history of migraine in the majority of persons with these headaches. Most migraine sufferers (70%) are women. Hormones affect women's headaches from menarche to menopause according to Dr. Diamond. Also, migraine headaches are the most frequently reported side effect of oral contraceptives.

Migraines may be triggered by stress or fatigue. Oversleeping can bring on a migraine attack in some people. The headache may also occur after the emotional release when a crisis is resolved. Foods such as processed meats, aged cheese, smoked and pickled foods, excessive caffeine, MSG used in Chinese cooking, and alcoholic beverages, especially red wine, have been linked to migraines.

Medical evaluation should begin with a complete health history. Persons are often asked to keep a detailed headache diary to help identify headache triggers and to determine the effect of medications and other therapies. A variety of prescription drugs are available to prevent and treat migraines. There are also many non-drug therapies, including breathing and relaxation exercises. Avoiding known triggers, and maintaining a regular eating and sleeping schedule is very helpful in preventing migraines for many people.

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