

## About Headaches

Headaches are one of the most universal of man's ailments. They can be a chronic, long-standing problem. More than 45 million Americans suffer from the excruciating pain of headaches. Headaches are common concerns among college students. They are biological realities. However, psychological stress from tests, deadlines and school-work conflicts and the like contribute to many types of headaches. Vulnerability to headaches varies from person to person depending not only on genetic make-up but also on a person's ability to cope with the many and varied life stressors, demands and commitments. Two of the major types of headaches are outlined below, and, while cures are rare, headaches can be controlled.

**Muscle Contraction Headache:** The pain of a muscle contraction headache is caused by the pulling of muscles in the neck and base of the head. The sustained contraction of skeletal muscles is usually part of a person's reaction to life stress. These are also called tension headaches and are characterized by a dull, throbbing pain felt on both sides of the head surrounding the scalp and occasionally affecting the shoulders as well as the neck.

Chronic muscle contraction headaches require medical examination of the head, neck and neurological systems in order to determine the etiology of the pain. For milder tension headaches, the appliance of warm, moist compresses and a gentle massage to the muscles involved provide some relief. Relaxation training and biofeedback treatment can provide relief. It is often hard when you have a headache to relax on your own. Optimum benefit from relaxation training can be obtained by being properly instructed individually or in a group. Biofeedback training is more complex than relaxation training. It targets specific physiological responses.

**Migraine Headache:** The pain of a migraine headache has recently been found to be due to biological abnormality of nerve cells and chemical messengers in the brain. During migraine attacks, biochemical changes occur in the brain, such as the depletion of the nerve-cell messenger serotonin. When prescribed medication is taken to stimulate serotonin action, relief from headache pain is often found at last. Migraine headache sufferers may find themselves depressed. They may also find that their sleep is fitful, and they may know family members who suffer as they do. Migraines are characteristically different from muscle contraction headaches because they can cause a partial or complete loss of vision.

People who are susceptible to migraines may find that weather changes, stress, as well

as bright lights, hormones and possibly food trigger migraine attacks. A spectrum of sensations or aura will occasionally precede some migraine attacks. Pain is often experienced on one side of the head and can be accompanied by vertigo, nausea and/or vomiting.

Relief is available for chronic headache sufferers. Medication and acupuncture, when performed under a physician's care, have helped many sufferers. Acupuncture, coupled with biofeedback and/or medication, can provide even more relief.

Headaches can also be caused by disease of the head, eyes, ears, or teeth, or high blood pressure. The pain from headaches having an organic base is generally different from the usual headache pain.

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOURSELF WITH HEADACHE PAIN**

You can help to diagnose your type of headache by describing the headache, as well as by keeping track of each headache's occurrence.

Talking about the life stressors which may be an underlying cause of your headache has been found to be helpful in relieving some types of headache pain. Relaxation training is also helpful and available.

**If you or a someone you care about suffers from headaches and you would like more information, come in and speak with a professional counselor in 1303 James Hall (0203J after October '04).**

**All services are free and confidential.**

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