

## Relieving Stress Headaches

In recognition of National Headache Awareness Week, we want to point out the interface of medical and mental health. It is quite common for people to experience physical symptoms when they are feeling stressed or anxious. Among other symptoms, headaches are some of the most commonly occurring physical side effects of stress.

The most common type of headache is the tension headache, which is caused by stress, depression, anxiety, poor posture, and jaw clenching. These headaches are characterized by a mild to moderate pain which people often describe as feeling as if there's a tight band around their head. Tension headaches can last from 30 minutes to an entire week, but are considered chronic if they occur 15 or more days a month for at least 3 months. Signs and symptoms of a tension headache include: dull, aching head pain, sensation of pressure across the forehead, sides, or back of the head, tenderness on scalp, neck, and shoulder muscles, and loss of appetite.

What can you do to help prevent the pain? Below are suggestions found to be helpful by the Mayo Clinic:

### 1. **Healthy Lifestyle Choices:**

- Eat healthy foods and don't skip meals (especially breakfast).
- Exercise regularly: During physical activity, the body releases chemicals that block pain signals to the brain.
- Get enough sleep: Maintain a normal sleep schedule throughout the week.
- Avoid excess caffeine: Although some caffeine can help curb headaches, heavy caffeine use can cause headaches and irritability.

2. **Stress Control:** Stress and tension headaches go hand-in-hand. This may mean setting aside 10 minutes each day to something that makes you feel good. Consider creating a 'happy list' of things you can do that involve different sensory experiences. What can you look at (movies), listen to (music), smell (flowers), taste (hot tea), do with your body (exercise), or have done to your body (massage) that helps you relieve stress?

3. **Ease muscle tension:** Apply heat or ice to soothe sore neck and shoulder muscles if you feel tense. Try yoga or progressive relaxation exercises to loosen up your muscles.

4. **Relax:** Try a deep-breathing exercise or conscious relaxation of the muscles.

5. **Keep a headache diary:** To help you determine what triggers your headaches.

If you find through keeping a headache diary that your headaches are related to stressful events in your day, therapy can be helpful in learning skills to experience day-to-day life as less stressful, allowing you to have fewer headaches and feel more relaxed.

You should also have a medical exam, if you have frequent headaches, to rule out medical illnesses and neurological problems.