What to do for headaches? [1]

Alice,

What do I have to do to get rid of my headache?

? Throbbing

Answer

Dear Throbbing,

Headaches can have many causes: tension (the most common), sinus, eyestrain, migraine, vascular (increased blood flow), or a brain tumor in rare cases. In addition, there are many kinds of pain: shooting, throbbing, dull, constant, sharp, etc.

Muscle headaches are often due to emotional or physical stress, such as poor posture. The muscles in the neck, scalp, and jaws tighten, producing a dull, aching sensation, or band of tension, around the head. Vascular headaches, which include the common migraine, are due to a constriction and then dilation of blood vessels in the head. Vascular headaches are usually severe, one-sided throbbing headaches often associated with nausea, vomiting, and visual disturbances (flashing lights or stars). Sinus headaches are caused by blockage of the sinus cavities with resulting pressure and pain in the cheeks, forehead, and upper teeth. These headaches are often associated with nasal congestion. Sometimes a combination of these types of headaches occurs at the same time.

Depending on the frequency and severity of your headaches, the following information may be useful:

**Self-Care Tips for Headaches**

- Apply ice packs or heat on your neck and head.
- Gently massage the muscles of your neck and scalp.
- Use relaxation exercises.
- Take aspirin, or an aspirin substitute, such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen.
- Use a decongestant medication, if you have nasal congestion.
- Reduce emotional and physical stressors, such as anger, eyestrain, or continuous loud noise.
- Avoid foods that may trigger headaches, such as aged cheeses, chocolate, nuts, red wine, alcohol, avocados, figs, raisins, or pickled foods.
If none of these work, see a health care provider who can help you determine a cause and manage the pain. S/he might refer you to a headache clinic. If you have an unusually severe headache, if it's accompanied by a fever and a very stiff neck, if you've recently had a head injury, or if it persists for more than three days, or you experience an increase in the severity or frequency of your headaches, see a health care provider immediately. Best of luck finding relief.

Alice!
Category:
General Health
Aches, Pains & Other Ailments

Related questions
What is fibromyalgia?  
Migraine headaches  
Concussions  
Can chronic eyestrain cause blindness?  
Meningitis  
Sex, orgasms, and headaches

Resources
Medical Services (Morningside)
Medical Services (CUMC)
Published date:
Apr 18, 1994
Last reviewed on:
Jul 21, 2014
Source URL: http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/what-do-headaches

Links