

Headache and migraine

The Health Column

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Nearly everybody will experience a headache at some stage in their lives. Headache is one of the most common minor ailments. Although it is quite unusual not to have at least one headache, a lucky few will go through life without ever experiencing one.

The reason some people never experience a headache is unknown. It may be linked to chemical transmitters in the brain that pass messages from one nerve cell to another. The brain uses these chemicals as a control mechanism for pain impulses, and these neurotransmitters also play a part in emotions. As a general rule, happier people have fewer headaches, but that is not the complete picture and we need to know more about this common health issue.



Headache and Migraine Awareness Week (15–21 September) aims to create a wider understanding of headache and migraine as major public health issues. Headache and Migraine Awareness Week is an initiative of Headache Australia – the only organisation in Australia supporting the more than 5 million Australians affected by headache and migraine.

So what is the difference between a headache and a migraine?

Headaches are usually harmless but can create concern about their origin. Occasionally headaches may indicate a more serious underlying disease state, such as brain tumour or stroke. This is why many people seek advice from their doctors and, in some cases, are referred to neurologists. However, according to Headache Australia, the severity of the headache generally has no relation to the seriousness of the diagnosis.

The types of headache can be categorised in various ways:

- 'Normal' headaches including those caused by time spent in front of a screen (excessive nerve stimulation), 'ice-cream' headache from cold, 'hot-dog' headache (food reaction), excessive consumption of alcohol, drugs and other substances, fasting headache, rebound headache, exercise headache, coital headache, and headache from excessive coughing.
- Recurring headaches including tension-type and cluster headache.

- ‘Nerve’ headaches, produced by direct irritation or compression of the nerves supplying the head, face, or neck. These include trigeminal neuralgia, glossopharyngeal neuralgia, neuralgia after shingles, atypical face pain, pain from the eye, sinusitis, head pain caused by teeth, temporomandibular joint dysfunction, and neck headache.
- Muscle-contraction headaches.
- Medicine-misuse headaches.
- Head injury headache.
- Headache caused by serious health issues. These include hydrocephalus, sub-arachnoid haemorrhage, meningitis, encephalitis, brain tumour, cerebral oedema, high blood pressure, stroke, temporal arteritis and benign intracranial hypertension.

Migraines are usually much more serious. These are headaches that typically last from 4–72 hours, during which time the sufferer may experience nausea and vomiting as well as sensitivity to light or sound. Migraine sufferers frequently report throbbing pain that worsens with normal activity.

In some people, migraines are associated with auras, which may occur before a person experiences a migraine. Auras are warning signs which usually consist of visual disturbances such as flashing lights, or changes in smell or perception. Migraine is a very common condition, yet many people remain undiagnosed or untreated. There are almost two million migraine sufferers in Australia, meaning that more people suffer from migraine in Australia than diabetes, asthma, or coronary heart disease.

Migraine is also a very debilitating condition, affecting a person’s ability to function in everyday life. Nearly all people who suffer from migraines report a reduction in social activities and work capacity.

Your local pharmacy is your health destination and your pharmacist can provide advice on headache and migraine, including causes of headache and migraine such as medicine use, alcohol consumption, and treatment options such as medicines and relaxation techniques. Your local pharmacy also supplies products used to treat headache and migraine including over-the-counter and prescription medicines. Many pharmacies also offer services to assist you with managing chronic pain.

Pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia’s Self Care health information have a range of helpful Fact Cards including *Headache*, *Migraine*, *Relaxation Techniques* and *Smoking*.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au ‘Supporting practice’ then ‘Self Care’, and then ‘Find a Self Care pharmacy’.