

# Headache and migraine

## *The Health Column*

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Next week, the 12th-16th September 2016, is Headache Awareness Week. It is brought to you by Headache Australia, a national charitable organisation dedicated to advocacy, research and education. Headache Australia, a division of the Brain Foundation, is the only organization in Australia that aims to support the more than 5 million Australians affected by headache and migraine. Headache Awareness Week is an opportunity to discuss the types of headaches, what causes them, and what can be done to ease the pain.

Headaches are very common. Almost everyone will experience headaches sometime during their lives. There are different types of headaches and it is possible to have more than one type of headache at the same time. Some common types of headaches include:

- Tension headache - usually affects both sides of the head and may feel like a tight band across the forehead,
- Sinus headache - can make your forehead feel tender due to blocked sinuses (the spaces between the bones of your face),
- Migraine headache – a severe headache that usually throbs. It often affects only one side of the head with the pain centred over one eye, the temple or back of the head. You may also get other symptoms like nausea, vomiting and sensitivity to light, noise and smell. Some people get an aura (e.g. flashing lights, blurred vision, tingling or numbness) up to an hour before the pain starts. A migraine may last from 4 to 72 hours. Migraines affect about 1 in 4 women and about 1 in 12 men and commonly start in childhood or as a young adult.

There are many causes or triggers for headaches including lack of food, eye strain, stress, too much alcohol, high blood pressure, and caffeine withdrawal. Migraines can also be triggered by certain foods such as cured meats (e.g. ham), chocolate, caffeine, nuts, pickled foods, monosodium glutamate (MSG), aged cheese, yogurt, onions, brown vinegar, and chicken livers. However, different things trigger migraines in different people.

Most headaches are harmless and respond to simple treatment measures. Many people treat themselves with simple painkillers such as paracetamol, drinking extra water, having a rest, or simply by waiting for the headache to go away. However, occasionally a headache can be a



symptom of a serious illness. Doctors and pharmacists can help find the cause of a headache and advise you on treatment options.

To treat a migraine, you may need specific pain-relief medicines. Simple painkillers such as paracetamol and ibuprofen can be effective. If these medicines don't help, your doctor can prescribe special migraine medicine for treatment and prevention. Migraines may improve with rest, sleep, a dark and quiet environment and drinking water.

There are some simple ways of reducing the number of headaches such as managing your stress levels, eating a balanced regular diet, exercising regularly, drinking plenty of water and getting plenty of sleep. Keeping a food and pain diary can be helpful for working out which foods, if any, trigger your migraines. If you know what triggers your headache, you may be able to avoid it.

Your local pharmacy can help too. Pharmacists are medicines experts. If you have a headache that has lasted for a long time or you don't regularly get headaches, speak to your pharmacist or doctor. From the pharmacy, you can get detailed information about headaches and migraines as well as different treatment options. Self Care Fact Cards such as *Headache, Migraine and Pain relievers* are available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information. NPS MedicinesWise is a helpful consumer website that has information about headaches and migraines. NPS MedicinesWise can be found at [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au).

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to [www.psa.org.au/selfcare](http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare), then click 'Find a *Self Care pharmacy* near you'.