

Headaches

What are headaches?

The main symptom of headaches is head pain. Though the majority of headaches are benign or not life-threatening, some may be an indicator of a more serious health issue. There are two categories under which most headaches fall:

- **Primary headaches** are not associated with an underlying health condition and associated with areas of the head and surrounding area that are sensitive to pain. **Tension headaches** (often triggered by stress, can range from mild to severe, and are characterized by dull, constant pain, pressure with possible aches in the jaw or neck), **migraine headaches** (characterized by intense, pounding pain lasting for hours or even days that may begin in the forehead, on one side of the head, or around the eyes and may also be accompanied by nausea and vomiting), and **cluster headaches** (less common and start very suddenly, are shorter in duration, often very severe, and occur once or more each day for a period of time) are all types of primary headaches.
- **Secondary headaches** are considered a symptom of an underlying medical issue and vary quite a bit in severity. These can be associated with a range of conditions such as sinus infections, dehydration, withdrawal from substances such as alcohol, drugs, caffeine, or certain medications (called **rebound headaches**), influenza (flu), concussions, panic attacks, high blood pressure, stroke, and meningitis, among others.

Start with self-care!

The most common treatments are rest and over-the-counter (OTC) medications, such as acetaminophen (brand name: Tylenol), ibuprofen (brand names: Advil, Motrin), or naproxen (brand name: Aleve). For moderate migraine pain, combination medication, such as aspirin and caffeine (brand name: Excedrin) may be helpful. Allergy medication may also be helpful if the headache(s) are triggered by uncontrolled allergens. Taking no more than the maximum recommended dosage over the indicated time period on the label is strongly advised. Checking in with a health care provider before using OTC medications is also recommended for those with another health condition or who are taking other medications. Additionally, an ice pack on the back of the neck or over the eyes may provide some relief. Conversely, a hot shower, a warm towel, or a warm water bottle over the eyes may also help to alleviate some pain.

When do I need to seek medical attention?

If 2 to 3 days of self-care does not provide relief, making an appointment to see a health care provider is recommended. For those who experience chronic headaches, a provider can prescribe both preventive and acute treatments to prevent and ease headache pain. Additionally, some have found cognitive behavioral therapy and acupuncture to be helpful in preventing headaches and providing pain relief.

However, for those experiencing a sudden, extremely painful headache (i.e., the worst headache of your life) occurring with slurred speech, facial paralysis, vision loss, confusion, high fever, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, or other alarming symptoms, seeking immediate medical help is advised and can be done by contacting the Columbia University Emergency Medical Service (CUEMS) or by going directly to the nearest hospital's emergency department.

How can I prevent headaches from occurring?

Incorporating healthy lifestyle behaviors may also help reduce the likelihood of some headaches, which include:

- Drinking more water — dehydration can cause headaches.
- Eating regular meals — fasting and low blood sugar can trigger headaches as well.
- Getting enough rest by sleeping at least 7 to 9 hours each night. Keeping a regular sleep schedule (i.e., waking up and going to bed around the same time every day) is also advised.
- Practicing relaxation techniques as stress and tension are a common culprit of headaches. This may include yoga, massage, or meditation.
- Being physically active by getting 30 minutes of activity most days of the week.
- Limiting intake of caffeine and alcohol.

Online & Off-Campus Resources

Go Ask Alice!: goaskalice.columbia.edu

Mount Sinai St. Luke's Hospital Emergency Department
(111th Street & Amsterdam Ave)

On-Campus Resources

Medical Services: 212-854-7426

health.columbia.edu/medical-services

Columbia University Emergency Medical Service
(CUEMS): 212-854-5555

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