

Tension Headache; What are they and how do you get rid of them?

Do you suffer from chronic tension headaches? Perhaps you have for years. You've tried all sorts of things but your tension headaches persist. You may be thinking that you'll just have to learn to live with them.

These headaches are generally caused by muscle spasm in the neck/base of the skull area. The paired greater & lesser occipital nerves arise from there and course within the scalp to the front of the head causing pain along the front and sides of the head which most patients refer to as "sinus". Tapping on the sinuses is a good way to differentiate what's going on; sinus inflammation will cause pain and tenderness when tapped. On the other hand, pressure at the base of the skull on the muscles at the top of the neck in the back will cause tenderness, helping to make the diagnosis.

Don't give up hope. You really can get permanent relief from your tension headaches.

How You Get Chronic Tension Headaches

Simply put, tension headaches come from muscle tension in your neck, shoulders and upper back. This tension is usually a result of poor posture and, less frequently, some sort of trauma (like a car accident).

The Cause of Chronic Tension Headaches

Here's how your tension headaches typically become chronic:

- You work all hunched over at your job
- You continue to practice poor posture at home
- This posturing tightens the muscles of your neck, shoulders and upper back
- After awhile, this tightness causes muscle spasms
- These spasms restrict blood flow to the back of your head and irritate nerves in the back of your neck and head

Here's a typical scenario: You go to work every day at a job that you're used to performing in a lousy posture. Maybe you stoop over your work, maybe you hunch over a computer terminal, maybe you drive all day. The common denominator is that while you do these jobs, your back's stretched out, your shoulders are rolled in and your head's jutting out. When you get home, you continue practicing this poor posture by curling up in front of the T.V., or sitting hunched over in your easy chair.

If you're like most people, you continue this posture when you go to bed because you sleep in the fetal position.

When you're caught in this cycle, you've trained your muscles to adapt to this abnormal positioning. This positioning elongates your back muscles, curls up your shoulder muscles, strains your neck muscles and constricts your chest. This is what causes your tightness. It's a sign that these muscles are under tremendous stress.

Unfortunately, it gets worse. The continual strain on your neck, shoulder and upper back muscles results in tearing on a microscopic level. Your body tries to prevent this tearing by forcing these muscles to knot up. The result: muscle spasms. Despite these spasms, some tearing does occur because of the continual strain you're putting on them. Over

time, your body tries to heal these tears by forming microscopic scar tissue over them. These scar tissue fibers effectively lock your spasms into place.

Why is this important? Because the tightness in your neck, shoulders and upper back and the spasms associated with this tightness restrict blood flow to the back of your head (it's like stepping on a turned-on garden hose). This tightness and spasm also irritate various nerves in the back of your neck and head.

There are two things you've got to do to get permanent relief from chronic tension headaches:

You must get rid of the spasms in your neck, shoulders and upper back so normal blood flow is resumed and nerve irritation is eliminated

You must correct your posture

The first step is to get rid of the scar tissue that's locking your spasms in place. You do this through a little-known acupressure/massage technique that breaks down this scar tissue (it's very easy to learn).

You have this acupressure/massage treatment performed on you once a week. After a few weeks - typically after 6-16 treatments - the scar tissue is broken down, the spasms are kneaded out, and the tightness eliminated.

The second step is to correct your posture. This is done by practicing some simple stretches for your neck, shoulders, upper back and chest. These stretches only take a few minutes a day.

A Stretch To Help Keep Your Tension Headaches From Coming Back

Here's an excellent stretch you can begin practicing now: the behind-the-back stretch. It can be done sitting or standing. If you're going to sit, make sure you have a chair with backing that comes halfway up your back.

Hook your arms over the back of the chair and pull your shoulder blades together (if you're standing, assume the military position: head up, shoulders back and stomach tight). As you do this, make sure you stick your chest out. As this is very important, you should exaggerate a little bit - and make sure you keep your head up, too.

Pull your shoulder blades together until you feel a pull in your shoulder joints. Don't go overboard on this; you don't want to cause any pain. Now hold this stretch for three full minutes (don't cheat and quit early; the length of this stretch is very important). At the end of this stretch, you should feel your back muscles loosen a bit; you may even feel a warm rush of blood up the back of your neck. Take breaks throughout the day to perform this stretch - it will help a lot!

It's critical that you diligently practice stretches to correct your posture because just undergoing the acupressure/massage technique alone will NOT permanently get rid of your chronic tension headaches.

This is so important that it bears repeating:

You must correct your posture to get permanent relief from your chronic tension headaches.

It makes sense, doesn't it? If you don't correct the mechanism that caused the problem - any problem - that problem will just come back. It's the same with your chronic tension headaches.

Spinal manipulation, injections of a local anesthetic, possibly with an anti-inflammatory steroid into tender trigger points can rapidly relieve the headaches, sometimes for a prolonged time. Anti-inflammatory medications taken by mouth can also help as can muscle relaxants which help reduce muscle spasm at the base of the skull/top of the neck. . Opiates are usually not needed for these headaches but at times they may be required for refractory cases. I like the combination of medications found in Excedrin Migraine Formula (and as a cheapskate, I look at the ingredients on the package and see if there's a generic/store-brand on the shelf with the same components at a lower price).

Complementary/Alternative Medicine

Nutritional supplements can also help reduce the frequency of tension headaches, some examples are;

- Magnesium: 250-400 mg three times per day
- Vitamin B6: 25 mg three times per day
- 5-HTP: 100 mg three times per day

To your health!

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