

Oh My Aching Head!

By Suze Hargraves

Headaches. Almost everyone gets them now and then. There are three major classifications of headaches: primary, secondary and cranial neuralgias/facial pain/other. The most common of these are called “primary” headaches. They include tension, migraine and cluster headaches. Both chronic and non-chronic types of these headaches fall into this category. We’re going to go over the chronic versions of these primary headaches today. It’s important to remember that the topic of headaches is a complicated one. Headaches are not always serious but they can be. Too many of us reach too readily for over-the-counter relief when none is really needed or worse, when that OTC medication covers up a more serious underlying condition.

90% of adults will experience tension headaches at some point or another. When tension headaches become a frequent occurrence it’s time to take a deeper look at the cause. It used to be thought that all tension headaches were a result of muscle tension, but The Mayo Clinic reports that “research suggests that there doesn’t appear to be a significant increase in muscle tension in people diagnosed with tension headache.” Changes to chemicals in the brain affect the pain response. Rather than reaching for a pain reliever to get rid of a tension headache, try increasing endorphins by going for a walk, talking to a friend or therapist or spend time on an activity that calms and centers you. Massage, acupuncture and hypnosis can also be used to help relieve chronic stress that can lead to reoccurring tension headaches. Treat your body right with exercise, proper diet and good posture. It really is amazing how when we treat our bodies with respect, our brains and emotions often respond quite favorably.

12% of the population experiences some level of migraines. These are not run-of-the-mill headaches. Migraines affect both children and adults and can occur for a variety of reasons. Symptoms can vary in type and intensity. Migraines are more than twice as likely to affect females. Migraines can take you down for hours and even days. Light and noise sensitivity, nausea and vomiting often accompany these excruciating headaches.

The causes of migraines vary from person to person and can include both genetic and environmental factors. The Mayo Clinic lists hormonal changes in women, some foods, stress, intrusive or unusual sensory stimuli, changes in wake-sleep pattern, intense physical exertion (not a regular workout-sorry still no excuse...) and changes in weather or barometric pressure. Even some medications can bring on migraines in those prone to them. Teens, according to Shawn Rogers, Nurse Practitioner in pediatrics at White Mountain Community Health Center, are particularly likely to suffer from migraines as a result of poor sleep habits, skipping meals, consuming excessive amounts of caffeine in energy drinks or eating “meals” that contain absolutely no protein. For all these reasons, it is incredibly important for migraine sufferers of any age to document when headaches occur and what’s going on at that time. Throwing a pill at a migraine is not always the best fix. My own migraines were shattering experiences that went on for days on end. One day, after looking over months of documentation on my diet, lifestyle and headache patterns, my doctor told me to try not drinking diet sodas for a while and see how that went. Low and behold I have never had another migraine. Not all migraines can be that simply resolved, but whatever you do don’t suffer in silence. Talk to your healthcare provider. Migraine headaches are as much a quality of life issue as they are a physical ailment.

Cluster headaches last weeks or months and then the patient may be headache free for years. The Mayo Clinic confirms reports “Cluster attacks typically occur with clocklike regularity during a 24-hour day, and the cycle of cluster periods often follows the seasons of the year.” Cluster headaches do not seem to be associated with the same types of triggers as migraines. It is believed that there is a

correlation between irregularities in the hypothalamus (the part of the brain that regulates the “biological clock”), hormones and neurotransmitters. Sufferers of cluster headaches, like migraine sufferers, are dealing with a quality of life issue. Self treatment of cluster headaches is not recommended. See a medical professional.

Treating any type of headache requires pro-activity on the part of the sufferer. Document when they occur, your symptoms, what you are doing, your environment and even your diet. A severe headache may be a sign of a severe condition or something easily manageable with proper treatment. The decision belongs to your health care team. Self-medicating is never the answer for any chronic condition. For more on these types of headaches visit www.mayoclinic.com or speak to your healthcare provider.

Use your head when dealing with chronic headaches. Be proactive and help your medical provider find the right treatment for you.

Suze Hargraves is a staff member and writer for White Mountain Community Health Center, a non-profit health care provider serving the Mount Washington Valley. Call (603) 447-8900, Ext. 1, for an appointment or information.