

THE FOUR TYPES OF HEADACHE PAIN

Discover the four types of headaches and drug-free
alternatives!

By Cade Holmseth, BFA, LMT, CMT

*Natural
Solutions to
Treat Without
Drugs*

The Four Types of Headache Pain: Natural Solutions to Treat Without Drugs

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Have you ever closed yourself off in a dark bedroom because of a headache, in the sheer hopes that the respite of sleep will continue when you wake up and you will be pain free? You hope the throbbing behind your right eye will go away, that the bright light won't bother you, and that every little sound won't intensify the stabbing pain shooting through your skull. This isn't always the case, of course.

Mary's story

I have a client, let's call her Mary (not her real name). Mary gets persistent headaches. Usually they start as something small and stay with her for long periods of time, sometimes days or even weeks. Periodically they get really bad and end up like the situation mentioned above, but usually they're just more of a nagging thing.

She was under the impression that she suffered migraines...all the time. Her doctor gave her this impression.

Mary is usually able to handle the headaches with over the counter (OTC) drugs and rest, but finds a lot of relief from massage. She even had some experience with prescription migraine drugs by her doctor's suggestion. The drugs and rest often don't fix the problem and tend to just prolong the time between her much needed body work.

One day, when the meds just weren't cutting it, she decided to try massage. This is where I enter into the story. After some questioning and a little bit of assessment, I found a lot of structural issues including the scoliosis she had been diagnosed with as a child. I also pinpointed bad physical habits she has that contribute to a lot of muscle tension. This tension was responsible for tension headaches that sometimes developed into migraines, but usually didn't.

These were the persistent tension headaches she was having, not migraines. Not only did this explain why the migraine drugs weren't helping, but also why the headaches sometimes felt so different from each other.

Headaches are, at best, a nuisance, and at worst can be completely debilitating, to the extent of missing work or fun with friends and family.

The meat and potatoes

Let's talk about what causes headaches. Headaches are one of the most common physical problems for humans with up to 90% of adults in the United States experiencing at least one each year. Headaches are only rarely an indication of a serious underlying disorder, but can still be quite a hardship and can lead to problems in work, social life, family, or even love life.

Headaches can be classified into 4 categories: Tension, vascular, chemical, and traction-inflammatory.

* *Tension-type headaches* are by far the most common type of headache people experience (90% or more). They are triggered by muscular tension caused by emotional or physical stress, bony misalignments, TMJ disorders, and other musculoskeletal imbalances. Lots of people misconstrue a bad tension headache with migraines.

* *Vascular headaches* include the infamous migraine headache, cluster headaches, and possibly sinus headaches. About 1 in 20 headaches is in this category. Triggers include food or smell sensitivities, alcohol use, shifts due to menstrual cycle etc. They can even start as a tension headache and progress to a migraine.

* *Chemical headaches* are due to chemical disturbances, the most common due to dehydration, low blood sugar ("hunger headaches"), or hormone shifts, but can also be caused by medications such as painkillers or drugs like caffeine.

* *Traction-inflammatory headaches* are the rarest type of headache, and the most dangerous. Sometimes they are called "secondary headaches" because they are a secondary symptom caused by something else that is underlying such as a tumor, aneurysm, infection of the nervous system such as spinal meningitis, or even inflammation due to trauma like a car accident.

Of the 4 types of headaches, tension headaches are really the only ones quickly addressed after the headache has already started. The vascular and chemical headaches can be addressed to some degree, especially if they start as a tension headache, but are usually treated on the preventative end of the spectrum. The traction-inflammatory types can be an indication of a serious or life threatening problem and should be under the care of a doctor or other licensed health care professional.





How do you get the help you need for your headaches?

The old headache "stand-by" is taking an over-the-counter drug such as acetaminophen (Tylenol is the non-generic name) or ibuprofen. Over the counter headache meds will often work for a common simple headache, but rarely address the underlying cause and can barely touch the worst of headaches.

Another problem is that a drug has to be processed by the liver and kidneys and can have serious side effects, especially over time. According to *Painkillerawareness.org* Over 16,500 deaths in the U.S. are caused by kidney failure each year linked to non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen. Tylenol can damage the liver and contribute to cirrhosis (fatty liver that can cause poor health or even death). And when over-the-counter drugs don't work, the next step is often doctor's appointments, missed work, and prescription drugs.



You have other choices.

Instead of drugs, consider other methods of treatment such as massage. According to the *American Journal of Public Health*, a study proved that headache frequency was "significantly reduced within the first week of the massage protocol," and "The duration of headaches tended to decrease during the massage treatment period." In other words, massage is more effective at treating and preventing headaches than any kind of drug. It is also an often cheaper and more pleasant experience with little to no negative side effects, and who doesn't like a good massage?

Although there really is no substitute for a skilled and experienced body worker, there are some easy things you can do to help yourself as well. A heat pack applied to the back of the neck, a hot bath with essential oils or epsom salts, even peppermint tea has been shown to reduce or relieve headaches.

There are other alternative health care professionals that can also be helpful in treating headaches: chiropractors adjust your structural alignment (bones) which can relieve muscle restrictions, naturopathic doctors use natural and preventative methods to treat headaches and look for their causes,



cognitive behavioral therapists treat the negative thought patterns that can lead to emotional causes of tension, and a really popular field of alternative care recently has been traditional Chinese medicine (acupuncture) to balance the energy meridians of the body to bring health.

I urge you to educate yourself and try alternative options. The benefits are vast as well as being enjoyable. Your body and mind will thank you--and spending time in agony, away from people, in a dark room, hoping the pain will go away, will be a thing of the past.

About the author:

Cade Holmseth LMT, CMT, BFA is licensed and nationally certified massage therapist and bodyworker in St. Paul. He owns and operates his own office and utilizes his years of experience as a professional dancer and years of service at a chiropractic office, to properly assess his clients' needs. He has a website at: www.hohbodywork.com, and facebook group: Hands of Health Bodywork.

***American Journal of Public Health:*

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1447303/>

***How Serious are NSAIDs Side Effects?*

<http://painkillerawareness.org/?p=19>