

What Can I Do About My Headache?

All of us at some point in our lives have experienced a good, whopping headache. You know, one of those that lingers and throbs and generally makes us miserable. Usually we attribute them to stress, eye strain (i.e., from staring at a computer screen), caffeine withdrawal, or even from



(gasp) a night of overindulgence. While these are all valid factors, one that is often overlooked is the neck. Headaches, which stem from the neck, may be due to muscles, nerves, vascular structures, discs, or even from the bones themselves.

The neck is made up of seven bones (the vertebrae), six discs, multiple ligaments and many muscles which work to support the head. Through these muscles and bones run many veins and arteries as well as nerves. Should the blood vessels or nerves get pinched somewhere, they may cause headaches. For example, if the muscles in the back of the neck and the base of the skull get tight, they can restrict

the blood flow to the scalp, causing pain in that area.

Pain can be referred to the head from specific vertebral levels in the neck, as well. The nerves in the upper neck may be pinched by bulging or herniated discs, or by narrowing of the spaces where they leave the spine (stenosis). The pain from these nerves may be referred anywhere in the head from the base of the skull to the forehead or even behind the eyes. For example, forehead headaches can originate at the C2-3 level, while headaches at the base of the skull can originate at C0-1.

Tension headaches may originate in the neck and usually present with the following characteristics:

- Pain that is more often present than absent
- Pain that feels like pressure or like a band
- Pain that is located over the whole head, in the forehead, or just in the neck.”*

Migraine headaches usually do not stem from the neck and will present with one or more of these qualities:

- Pain that comes in attacks and does not last for more than 1 week
- Pain that is throbbing and pulsating
- Pain that is usually unilateral [on one side]
- Other signs or indications, such as flickering of light, poor vision, or vomiting

There are many options, which can be utilized in the treatment of headaches. These include modalities (i.e. heat and ice), manual techniques (such as massage and myofascial release), self-treatment techniques (like relaxation techniques), and ultimately medication, either over the counter or prescribed by your doctor.

Modalities consist of heat or ice to the neck or base of the skull, ultrasound (deep heat), or electrical stimulation. These modalities work to relax the structures in the neck, letting the blood flow more freely.

Manual treatments include massage, myofascial release, and craniosacral therapy. These techniques also facilitate relaxation of the muscles in the neck and head, thereby decreasing the pinch on blood vessels and nerves. From there it progresses to traction (manual and

possibly mechanical) and sustained positions to open up the spaces in the neck and decrease the possible involvement of the discs. By opening up the spaces between the vertebrae, the nerves then have more room to “breathe” and there is less pinching,

Self-treatments are probably the most important of the lot. This may be as simple as correcting one's posture, to applying ice or heat, or taking long slow breaths to put you in a more relaxed state, thereby reducing the tightness in the neck muscles. Another very important self-treatment technique is postural correction. When one sits, stands or lies down in proper alignment (i.e. using a lumbar support, or making sure one's ears are over the shoulders and the shoulders in line over the hips) the bones in the neck fall into a position where the muscles don't have to work very hard and the ligaments aren't pulled taut. This position should decrease the tension in the muscles and decrease any pressure on the nerves or vascular structures, thus reducing any headaches, which may be of these origins. So, the next time you have a headache, sit up a little straighter. It just might do the trick.