

THE HEADACHE & PAIN RELIEF CENTRE

TREATING CHRONIC HEADACHE: A WESTERN DOCTOR'S HOLISTIC VIEW

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Everyone gets an occasional headache. However, a small but significant number of people live with daily or almost daily headache pain for weeks, months, or even years without relief. How does this condition come about?

It all starts with the brain.

Researchers once thought that migraines started with a spasm of blood vessels in the brain, which would be felt by the patient as an aura. Compensatory widening of the blood vessels then leads to the pounding headache. We now know this is not true. Numerous researchers have shown that the cause of migraines (and probably all chronic head aches) is abnormal function in a specialized set of nerves, called the trigeminal system, that bring messages to the brain.



Triggering these abnormally sensitive nerves leads to the leakage of chemicals called 'inflammatory neuropeptides' in specific areas of the brain, causing a local reaction felt by the body as headache. As nerves and blood vessels travel in intimate association, the process that leads to migraines and headaches is now called 'neurovascular inflammation'.

What initiates neurovascular inflammation?

The brain is like a computer centre monitoring the body. It receives a continuous flow of data to be sorted, processed, and acted upon. Most people have built-in filters in the form of 'inhibitory nerve cells,' which limit the flow of information the senses detected, it would be overloaded. In fact, this is what people with migraines experience. It is as if their filters are more porous. Information coming from the 5 senses can pile up to overwhelm that brain. Bright light, sound, certain foods and spices, and especially odours can all act as triggers to start headaches; we do not know exactly why this happens. However, many factors can act as triggers on a 'susceptible brain.'

Most triggers are secret agents.

The triggers found outside our bodies are only a small part the problem. An equal or larger number of triggers lurks within the body.

Genetics

Strictly speaking, this is not a trigger but rather an essential component. The sensitivity of the trigeminal system is probably genetically determined before birth. Many of us do not have legs of exactly equal length. We don't stand perfectly straight. Hold a telephone receiver between the ear and shoulder puts strain on one side of the neck. Our heads are usually too far forward when looking at the computer screen. Many people have foot arches that collapse. Damage to the jaw joint (temporomandibular joint, or TMJ) can also occur. All these things escape our conscious thought, but as can act as triggers. They send out a beacon of information constantly harassing the brain with the message that 'something wrong.' When the weather changes and you've had too little sleep the night before, this may be enough to flip the headache production switch and start the ball rolling.

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Rebound

A rebound headache is the headache that returns the next day after the frequent use of certain drugs. Codeine, Demerol, and other narcotics, as well as caffeine, can produce this effect. So can plain acetaminophen (Tylenol) or acetylsalicylic acid (Aspirin). Perhaps the worst group of drugs for producing rebound is also the one that has revolutionized the treatment of migraines, namely the triptans. These include sumatriptan, zolmitriptan, naratriptan and rizatriptan. Taken up to twice a week they can quickly eliminate migraines; taken more often, they can bring on the next headache tomorrow.

Lifestyle

This is one of most important factors in headache production. Migraineurs need regular schedules to allow the brain filtering system to work efficiently. Varying amounts of sleep (too much is as bad as too little), skipping meals, burst of activity alternating with sloth, and irregular hormone cycles all lead to an increase in pain.

Stress

Stress by itself does not cause a headache. In many chronic-pain patients, however, stress produces a release of catecholamines, the 'fight or flight' hormones. These hormones prime our muscles into action, increase the efficiency of the nervous system, boost circulation, and put the brain on extra-super vigilant alert. When the nervous system is already overloaded with information, the headache factory becomes even more powerful.

Treatment of headaches.

Treatment of chronic headache begins with the identification of all the triggers, both obvious and hidden, that are acting on the brain.

First is to identify the medications and dietary items that could be causing rebound headaches. For example you may want to stop automatically reach for the pill bottle or the coffee cup.

The next step is to find the main areas in the head and neck that are sending abnormal messages. The jaw and the small joints on each side of the neck (facet joints) are the likeliest problem areas. It takes a sensitive touch to discern one neck facet join from another and gauge if it moves as it should. An experienced physiotherapist, chiropractor, massage therapist, osteopathic practitioner, or headache doctor can usually locate the problem.

The tricky part is getting the right combination of treatments. Because of the multifactor nature of headaches, as many triggers as possible must be attacked and correct simultaneously for treatment to work.

First, the sensitivity of the headache centres can be reduced with a course of prescription medication called 'prophylaxis.' Prophylactic medications may take 3 to 6 weeks before their full effect is realized. Two different medications with different actions can be combined in lower doses for greater effect. Some examples of the medications used are certain blood-pressure pills, antidepressants, or antiseizure medications. Herbal medicines like feverfew may be used instead of, or in addition to prescription medications. Certain essential oils and homeopathic remedies may also be used.

Physical therapy should be initiated next. This implements gradual corrections in body posture, body movement (biomechanics), and in the ergonomics of the work and home environment.

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Lifestyle and rebound-causing agents are next. Sleep, diet, and exercise must be as regular as possible. Caffeine, codeine, acetaminophen, and aspirin must be tapered off rapidly or quit abruptly the patient must expect to be quite uncomfortable at this stage for 2 to 4 weeks while the body 'detoxifies' itself. Plenty of fluids, fresh fruit, hot baths, and naturopathic cleansing treatments may help. Do not plan any major events during this time.

A treatment called 'nerve block' is rapidly becoming the definitive method of treating chronic headache. This technique uses local anesthetic to "freeze" the nerves responsible for conducting trigger signals to the brain. This is a safe, effective, simple treatment that allows the body's own healing ability a window of opportunity. While these trigger signals are stopped, the brain's filters can be repaired and start up again. If offending triggers are eliminated as well, headaches may never recur.

Once the daily pain cycle is broken, some treatment for the occasional headache is needed. The group of medications referred to earlier, the triptans, stops the chain of events leading to neurogenic inflammations, eliminating the headache, not just covering it up. Pain relievers used sparingly can help. If practiced frequently, self-healing techniques such as Yoga, Tai Chi, Qi Gong and mindful meditation, may stop headaches or prevent the release of stress hormones that spur them on.

Chronic daily headaches do not have to be a fact of life. Careful inventory of triggers, changing of some daily habits and a well thought out treatment plan may get rid of this life-robbing scourge.

For more information or a consultation contact The Headache & Pain Relief Centre 416.493.9762 or visit our website www.headachepainreliefcentre.ca