

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

## Drug-Free Approaches to Headache Prevention

*Do you suffer from headaches? Dr. Gravesen wants you to know that relief is possible, without resorting to hazardous medications. Read on to learn winning all-natural solutions to head pain from Dr. Gravesen.*



### Get Adjusted Regularly

Dr. Gravesen finds that the root of many headache sufferers' pain lies not in the head but in the spine of the neck (cervical spine). Headaches are often an indication of a hidden condition called *vertebral subluxations*. Vertebral subluxations result from misaligned spinal bones (vertebrae) in the spine. When this disorder affects the spine of the neck (cervical spine), it can spark chronic pain and limited mobility.

One study of more than 5,000 headache sufferers determined that about 40 percent of incidences start in the cervical spine (*Wien Med Wochenschr* 1994;144:102-8).

In another inquiry, radiographic analysis of the cervical spines of 47 patients with headache revealed that 97 percent of all patients exhibited significantly abnormal mobility in at least one segment in their cervical spines, a key sign of vertebral subluxation (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 1993;16:428-31). In addition, 43 percent exhibited abnormalities at four or more segments. Eighty-four percent had at least two major fixations of cervical bones.

To ward off vertebral subluxations, schedule regular appointments with Dr. Gravesen. Scientific research shows that chiropractic adjustments slash neck pain and headaches. One such review of 683 patients showed that chiropractic care was as effective

as prescription medication for tension-type headaches and migraines — and more effective than massage (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2001;24:457).

### Conduct Neck Posture Checks

One analysis concluded that 77 percent of all headache sufferers studied had a marked reduction, absence or reversal of their normal cervical spinal curves.

“These findings support the premise that the neck plays an important, but largely ignored role in the manifestation of adult benign headaches.” (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 1993;16:428-31.)

To keep your neck posture perfect, post a sign in eyeshot of your computer or desk to remind you to maintain proper neck alignment.

If you are unsure how to hold your head in proper neck posture, ask Dr. Gravesen to show you. The doctor can also teach you simple posture-checks and exercises.

### Pass Up Painkillers

Medication overuse headache (MOH) is a significant cause of headache, even among people who limit their use of pain medication. Studies show that prescription and over-the-counter pain medicine may instigate headaches, ironically guaranteeing more pain. Research indicates that up to 15 per-

cent of patients at headache clinics and 1 percent of the general population suffer from chronic daily headache due to medication misuse — an epidemic statistic (*J Child Neurol* 2001;16:448-9).

Maintaining regular chiropractic appointments will stave off headaches and curb reliance on pain medication.

### Watch Out for Other Drugs

A plethora of commonly used medications may also spark headache. In addition, most illegal drugs are associated with headache.

Medications that list headache as a possible side effect include oral contraceptives, hormone replacement therapy, antidepressants, cold medications, decongestants, allergy medications, heart medications and drugs for high blood pressure.

Overuse of certain vitamins and dietary supplements, such as iron, vitamin A and vitamin D, may also spawn headache. On the other hand, magnesium, B-complex vitamins and feverfew may avert head pain.

If you suspect a medication you are taking may be to blame for your head pain, look into natural alternatives. For instance, if you have high cholesterol,

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is it possible to control it with diet and exercise interventions? If you find yourself frequently suffering from colds and downing medication, consider natural ways to boost your immune system, such as following a healthful diet, getting enough exercise, employing a stress-reduction technique and getting regular chiropractic check-ups. However, never discontinue use of a medication without consulting with the physician who prescribed it.

### **Prevent Eye Strain**

Had your eyes examined recently? Vision problems may spark headaches.

Eye strain from computer work can also provoke head pain. In one study, workers who spent a minimum of 11 hours per week in front of a computer terminal were 50 percent more likely to suffer weekly headaches, compared with their counterparts who did not work at computers (*Am J Epidemiol* 1999;150:1223-8). Limit computer work whenever possible, and take care to give your eyes a break from the screen at least once an hour. Also, if your work requires you to stare at a computer all day, at least limit at-home recreational computer time.

### **Limit Alcohol & Avoid Smoke**

Drinking alcoholic beverages, even in moderation, may also spark head pain for some individuals. Red wine and beer, which contain the chemical histamine, are particular culprits for migraine sufferers.

Smoking, and exposure to secondhand smoke, may also up the risk of headache.

### **Exercise Everyday**

Daily aerobic exercise staves off headache, according to research (*Cephalalgia* 2003;23:972-6).

Another way that exercise prevents headaches is by keeping emotional depression at bay. Studies show that people with depression have an elevated risk of headache (*N Engl J Med* 1999;341:1329-35). Regular exercise

is as, and possibly more, effective than antidepressant medication for emotional depression (*Psychoso Med* 2000;62).

### **Limit VOC Exposure**

Chemical fumes, such as from gas, cleaning products, perfumes, paint and those produced in manufacturing, may trigger headaches. In addition, although no obvious fume is produced, “off-gassing” of toxins from carpets, synthesized fabrics or other materials may incite headache.

These materials emit chemicals called volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which trigger headache and allergy symptoms in some individuals (*Am J Epidemiol* 1999;150:1223-8).

Exposure to VOCs may also raise the risk of developing cancer (*Am J Ind Med* 2005;48:157-67).

To learn how to avoid VOCs, visit the Environmental Protection Agency’s Web page on the subject at [www.epa.gov/iaq/voc.html](http://www.epa.gov/iaq/voc.html).

### **Don’t Skimp on Sleep**

If you suffer from headaches, take care to get at least seven hours of shut-eye per night. Also, maintain a regular sleep schedule with a set bedtime and wake time. Sleep deprivation and inconsistent sleep schedules trigger headache.

Patients with morning headaches should also be evaluated for sleep apnea, researchers report (*Arch Intern Med* 1999;159:1765-8).

Snoring is also linked with chronic headache (*Neurology* 2003;60:1369-71).

### **Manage Anger & Stress**

In a study of 422 adults, Robert Nicholson, Ph.D. looked at how angry a person is, how much he or she internalizes anger and how severe and frequent headaches are. He also considered whether the individual was anxious or depressed.

“We found that holding in anger is the biggest predictor of headaches, among

the group of patients we studied,” explains Dr. Nicholson (*Headache* 2003;43:651).

However, he cautions that “there are times that expressing anger isn’t the best thing. ...What I would hope to do is to help people learn ways to lengthen their fuses so they avoid becoming angry.”

Employing stress reduction techniques, such as yoga, t’ai chi and bio-feedback, also sends head pain packing. In addition, meditation or prayer may be helpful.

### **Cut the Coffee**

Although caffeine may alleviate headaches, regular caffeine intake can cause drug rebound tension headaches and may also trigger migraines.

### **Dissect Your Diet**

Some foods may provoke headaches, particularly migraines. Foods to avoid include cheese, chocolate and refined carbohydrates. In people with a sensitivity to gluten, wheat may bring on a headache. Choose food in its natural state. Avoid processed dishes, preservatives and additives like monosodium glutamate (MSG) and nitrates. Sugar substitutes, such as aspartame, may also incite head pain (*Headache* 2001;41:899). And, eating frozen or cold foods quickly produces a phenomenon known as “ice cream headache.”

### **Check Your Blood Pressure**

Individuals with chronic headache should be screened for high blood pressure, say scientists. Although severe hypertension has long been associated with head pain, recent reports indicate that mild-to-moderate hypertension may also provoke headache (*Arch Intern Med* 2000;160:1654-8).

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