

## Brain Injury Recovery – Headaches

Chronic recurrent headaches commonly follow head injury, and interestingly, this seems to occur more often in individuals who have experienced minor head trauma than in those more seriously injured. The vast majority of people who experience persistent post-trauma headaches have no intracranial abnormalities to explain their headache pain. Research studies have identified different types or patterns of headache pain that can occur. It is possible to have more than one type at the same time.

### Steady Pressure with a Cap-like Distribution

These are the most commonly reported after brain injury. As the title indicates: these are described as steady pressure, often distributed like a cap. Intensity of pain can range from mild to severe. Duration of headache can be hours to several days. These headaches can persist for many years. There is usually deep tenderness present in the neck or shoulder region. The pain can be made worse by sustained contraction of the neck, upper back, and shoulder muscles.

### Tenderness Around the Impact Site

A relatively superficial tenderness is reported over the impact site. There may or may not be a scar present. Pain might occur spontaneously, or when pressure to the site is applied. Pain intensity is usually described as moderate, and these headaches typically resolve in about one year.

### Episodes of Aching or Throbbing Pain, Usually on One Side of the Head

These headaches tend to occur in the form of attacks, and are reported most commonly near the temple region of the head. The attacks may be of short duration, or can represent an intensification of the first type of headache noted above. Intensity can range from mild to severe. These headaches tend to be brought on by physical effort, coughing, bending, or lying down. Sometimes, these can become persistent (rather than occasional), typically starting in the morning, and continuing all day. This tends to occur more commonly in people with a history of migraine headaches.

### Pain in the Temple Region

Described as an intermittent, recurrent, steady pain in the region of the temples, or just above this area. The pain can occur on one or both sides, and is sometimes described as a band. These headaches are typically accompanied by jaw problems (TMJ joint dysfunction).

## What Can You Do?

1. It is often important to keep a headache diary to document your headache patterns so an effective diagnosis and treatment program can be developed.
2. Talk to your doctor. There are many medications used to treat headaches; it is usually a process to find what works for you.
3. Attend treatment for the physical problems (muscle and joint dysfunction) that that occurred at the time of injury, and that can be associated with headaches.
4. Learn relaxation techniques. These are effective in reducing headache pain, physical tension, and improving function throughout the day. There are many tapes commercially available that you can start with, or professionals that can train you to use these techniques.
5. Learn how your thoughts and feelings affect headaches. Often the more attention we give to a pain problem, the more intense it becomes. Also, negative self-talk can make the problem more distressing. These factors can create a vicious cycle of escalating pain symptoms and tension. Professionals such as psychologists and counselors can assist with this process.
6. Learn to divert your attention away from the headache. Most research has shown that we can only pay close attention to one this at a time. Doing a positive, enjoyable activity, listening to relaxing music, or using a relaxation tape can decrease attention to the headache and decrease pain.
7. Get enough sleep and rest. If you are having difficulty sleeping: develop a good *sleep routine*.
8. Allow time for rests during the day. After one of these rests, you may be fresh again and able to take on some of those more difficult tasks.
9. Start exercising. You may need to check first with your physical or occupational therapist or doctor to find out which is the best and safest type of exercise program for you. Begin with just a little, and gradually increase.
10. Eat a good, nutritious diet. There are some headaches that are triggered by certain foods. Contact your doctor for the best diet for your situation.
11. Limit your caffeine intake to 1 – 2 servings per day, and avoid this 4 hours before you go to sleep. Too much caffeine can affect your ability to get a restful sleep.
12. Avoid alcohol or other substances that affect your mental alertness, energy level, or your sleep cycle.