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# Managing Tension-type Headache Symptoms

A tension-type headache can develop slowly. Being aware of the symptoms helps you recognize a headache early. Then you can act to reduce pain and relieve tension. Methods for relieving your symptoms include self-care and medicine.

## Tension-type symptoms

The earlier you recognize the symptoms of a tension-type headache, the easier it is to treat. Tension-type headaches may:

- Start with fatigue, tension, or pain in the neck and shoulders
- Feel like a band around the head
- Be focused at the temple, the back of the head, behind the eyes, or in the face
- Come and go, or last for days, weeks, or even longer
- Involve referred pain—this means that the area that hurts may not be where the problem starts

## Self-care during a tension-type headache



When you have a tension-type headache, there are things you can do to relax, loosen muscles, and reduce the pain:

- **Brush your scalp lightly.** Use a soft hairbrush.
- **Give yourself a massage.** Knead the muscles running from your shoulders up the back of your skull. Or ask a friend to gently massage your neck and shoulders.
- **Use an ice pack.** To make an ice pack, put ice cubes in a plastic bag that seals at the top. Wrap the bag in a thin towel or cloth. Then apply this directly to the place where you feel pain (such as your neck or temples).

- **Use moist heat.** This can help relax your muscles. Take a warm shower or bath. Or drape a warm, moist towel around your neck and shoulders.

## Relieving pain and tension

Over-the-counter or prescription medicine can help ease pain. Another way to reduce your pain is to use relaxation techniques to loosen tight muscles.

## Medicine

Medicines used for tension-type headaches include:

- **NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs).** These include aspirin and ibuprofen. NSAIDs ease inflammation and help block pain signals.
- **Acetaminophen.** This treats pain. Some formulations contain caffeine.
- **Muscle relaxants.** These can reduce painful muscle contractions.

## Taking medicine safely

Be aware that:

- Taking analgesics (pain relievers) or drinking too much coffee may lead to rebound headaches. These are frequent or severe headaches that can happen if you miss a dose of medicine. So take pain medicines only as needed. If you think you have these headaches, contact your healthcare provider.
- Taking too much medicine can cause sleep problems or stomach upset. Some over-the-counter headache medicines may contain caffeine. These may disrupt sleep and worsen pain.

## Relaxation techniques

A trainer, class, book, or tape may help you learn these techniques. One or more of these methods may work for you:

- **Deep breathing.** Slow, calm, deep breathing can help you relax. Breathe in for a count of 5 or more. Then slowly let the breath out.
- **Visualization.** Imagining a peaceful, secure scene can give you a sense of control over your body and surroundings.
- **Progressive relaxation.** This is done by tightening and then releasing muscle groups. Start at the top of your head and work your way down your body. Tighten each muscle group for 5 to 10 seconds. Then release the muscle group for the same amount of time.
- **Biofeedback.** This is a type of training in which you learn to control certain physical functions and responses. This helps you learn to reduce muscle tension.