

Healthful Hints for Stressful Times: Headaches & Muscle Tension

If you suffer from headaches, or are experiencing neck and shoulder pain, it may be your body's way of telling you it is tense. Some headaches are generally thought to result from muscle tension, emotional stress, or fatigue. Headaches and muscle tension are common reactions to the increasing pressures at work and in our lives. It is possible to make minor adjustments that will help you feel better and in control.

To prevent tension headaches, try one or more of these tips:

- ❑ **Reduce sensory inputs.** Take a five minute break every hour or two and close your eyes. It helps to give your eyes a rest, especially after a long time working at the computer or reading.
- ❑ **Drink plenty of fluids.** Don't forget to drink fluids, especially water, to avoid dehydration which may contribute to headaches.
- ❑ **Eat something.** Make sure you are eating regularly; do not skip meals. Low blood sugar due to skipping breakfast or lunch is a common cause of headaches.
- ❑ **Take a nap.** Get enough rest and sleep. Try to maintain constant sleep patterns, including on the weekends and holidays. However, avoid naps if you have trouble sleeping through the night.

To try to relieve the tightness in your head, neck, or shoulders, try one or more of these quick techniques:

- ❑ **Relax your muscles.** Several times a day or when you become aware of shoulder tension, gently stretch your neck muscles. Drop your shoulders down, let your arms fall loose by your side, slowly rotate your head from side to side, and gently bend your neck so that your head falls forward. Repeat until some of the tension is released.
- ❑ **Focus on breathing.** Take a few moments to focus on inhaling and exhaling slowly; inhale through your nose deeply, counting slowly to ten, then exhaling in the same manner. Repeat several times.
- ❑ **Use cold and hot together.** To soothe and comfort the muscles in the back of the neck and shoulder, try a cold compress followed by a warm compress.
- ❑ **Exercise.** One of the most powerful and effective methods for relieving muscle tension is exercise. A brisk walk around the block is a fast and simple way to release some pent-up tension.
- ❑ **Use massage.** Knead the muscles along your shoulders, neck, and back of the skull. Gently run your head, forehead, temples, facial muscles, and jaw to relieve tension.

- ❑ **Watch your caffeine intake.** Sometimes a headache is a symptom of “caffeine withdrawal”, the result of regularly consuming too much caffeine, then suddenly decreasing the amount of caffeine consumed. To avoid this type of headache, watch your caffeine intake so that it does not exceed 200 mg a day (about one to two cups of brewed coffee). If you are trying to cut back on caffeine, decrease the amount you consume gradually over a period of a few days to a week.

Although many headaches are generally thought to result from muscle tension, emotional stress, or fatigue, it is important to note there are other causes of headaches. If your headache persists for days, weeks, or even months, consult with a physician. The same is true for muscle tension. If you are experiencing pain in your neck and shoulders that persists for days, weeks, or even months, or if the pain increases in intensity, consult your physician.

Also see:

How to Manage the Stress of these Difficult Times, available at www.uhs.berkeley.edu.

Healthful Hints for Stressful Times: Caffeine Use

Healthful Hints for Stressful Times: Eating Well

Healthful Hints for Stressful Times: Sleeping Soundly

Healthful Hints for Stressful Times: Staying Active

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