

Denita Young
County Extension Agent -FCS
Rains County

Self-care for Primary Headache Relief

“Oh, my aching head.” What hurts when you have a headache? Though it may feel like it, a headache is not a pain in your brain – in fact the bones of the skull and the tissues of the brain never hurt because they lack pain-sensitive nerve fibers. Most headaches happen outside the skull in the nerves, blood vessels, and muscles that cover the head and neck. Your brain tells you when other parts of your body hurt, but it can’t actually feel pain.

Headaches fall into two main categories – primary and secondary. Primary headaches occur on their own and not as the result of any other health problem, while secondary headaches result from another cause or condition (e.g., head injury, blood vessel problem, infection, tumor, etc.). Seek medical care immediately if you have any of the following headache warning signs:

abrupt, severe headache, which may be like a thunderclap;

headache with a fever, stiff neck, mental confusion, seizures, double vision, weakness, numbness, or speaking difficulties;

headache after a head injury, especially if it gets worse ; or

chronic, progressive headache that is precipitated by coughing, exertion, straining, or a sudden movement.

Primary headaches, which include tension-type headache, migraine, and cluster headache, usually have some common characteristics by which your doctor can make a diagnosis, including:

stable pattern of headache over many months or years;

long-standing history;

family history of similar headaches;

normal physical exam; or

headaches consistently triggered by hormonal cycle, specific foods, or specific sensory input (light, odors, weather changes).

If you suffer with primary headaches, there are things you can do to take care of yourself and reduce the likelihood, frequency, intensity, and severity of headaches. First, see your doctor to be sure there are no underlying (secondary) causes, and get a specific diagnosis and treatment or management plan. Next, try creating a lifestyle pattern to reduce headache. Headaches tend to love change, so keeping a regular schedule and healthy habits can reduce headache occurrences and pain severity. Here are some headache hygiene suggestions:

Maintain regular sleep patterns, striving for 7-9 hours of sleep each night. Go to sleep and wake up at the same time each day.

Eat regular meals. Don’t skip meals. Low blood sugar can be a headache trigger; too much sugar may lead to an increase in blood sugar followed by a rapid decline, which may also trigger headache. Keep a balance.

Stay hydrated with plenty of water.

Exercise regularly. This can reduce the frequency and severity of headaches as well as reduce stress (a common headache trigger).

Reduce stress. Avoid conflict when possible; resolve disputes calmly; take a short break to do something enjoyable or relaxing; try deep breathing exercises; seek stress management strategies from a trained counselor or therapist.

Limit caffeine and alcohol.

If you have been diagnosed with primary headache and do not have good pain management through self-care or a previously prescribed treatment plan, see your doctor. New medications and management strategies for pain relief and prevention may be available to help you.

For more information, contact the Texas AgriLife Extension Service at 903/473-5000, ext. 160.

For more information on headaches, please see our *HealthHints* newsletters at <http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/healthhints/2009/may/help-for-headache-part1.pdf> and <http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/healthhints/2009/jun/help-for-headache-part2.pdf>

Written by Janet M. Pollard, MPH, AgriLife Extension Associate – Health, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, Texas A&M System. April 2009.

The information herein is for educational purposes only. References to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended or no endorsement by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service is implied.

Extension programs serve people of all ages regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, disability or national origin.

The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating.

