

Treating Your Own Headaches.

You don't necessarily need a doctor's prescription to treat your headaches. Here are some ways you can find relief, without medication:

- Apply an ice pack to the painful area of your head. Try placing it on your forehead, temples, or the back of your neck.
- Take a warm bath or shower; take a nap; or take a walk.
- Ask someone to rub your neck and back, or treat yourself to a massage.
- Apply gentle, steady rotating pressure to the painful area of your head with your index finger and/or thumb. Maintain pressure for seven to 15 seconds, then release. Repeat as needed.
- Rest, sit, or lie quietly in a low-lit room. Close your eyes and try to release the tension in your back, neck, and shoulders.
- If you have excessive muscle contractions in the neck, it may be helpful to perform physical therapy exercises every day.

Cure your headache - naturally

If you suffer from headaches, you are not alone. Thousands of people experience regular headaches and migraines. Unlike a migraine, a headache is not a neurological condition. It is a symptom of stress, illness, or an unhealthy lifestyle such as not eating or sleeping properly.

A typical tension headache is felt around the shoulders, back of the neck and ends as a tight band across the front of the head. It can last from 15 minutes to three hours and arrive as a one off. Or it can come in bouts every one to three days which last for six to eight weeks.

The Migraine Action Association says: 'Eating regularly, maintaining a good sleep pattern, not drinking too much alcohol and drinking two litres of water a day helps keep headaches at bay.'

Should your saint-like healthy lifestyle slip, you can try one of our five alternative cures

Massage and essential oils

The three main essential oils that help to relieve headaches are Roman Chamomile, Clary Sage and Lavender. Aroma therapist Alison Parton says: 'When essential oils are massaged into the body, or added to the bath, they are infused into the blood stream. As they enter the circulation system, they act as a natural painkiller.

'They also work on the olfactory - or smell - system. When you breathe in oils, this triggers the central nervous system to act on the property of the oil.'

Essential oils for headaches:

Roman Chamomile: As an effective anti-inflammatory, Roman Chamomile acts as a muscle relaxant.

Lavender: When infused into the blood stream, Lavender acts as a natural pain reliever.

Clary Sage: Good for hyper tension, Clary Sage slows down the heart rate. This in turn lowers blood pressure and prevents any build-up of tension.

How to use:

Pour six to eight drops of essential oil into a hot bath. Soak for 20 minutes.

Essential oils can be very powerful - do not use them if you're pregnant.

For massage, add two drops of essential oil to five millilitres of sweet almond oil.

Scalp massage: Using your fingertips, apply vigorous friction strokes all around the scalp. This brings fresh blood to the nerve endings around the tension in the scalp and helps to loosen the muscles.

Forehead massage: Place your index fingers either side of the bridge of your nose - just where the eyebrows meet. Press quite hard. Applying steady pressure, work your fingers across the eyebrow area. This breaks down toxins and helps to release any tightness around the front of the skull.

Food avoidance

Cutting out certain foods can help people who suffer from headaches. New research suggests that for some people, headaches may be triggered by gluten, found in grains such as wheat, rye and oats. When ten patients were switched to gluten-free diets, nine experienced full or partial relief. Other foods including chocolate, cheese, red wine, coffee and tea are also known to trigger headaches among some people. This is because these foods contain natural substances called vasoactive amines.

Unlike other food substances, when absorbed into the blood stream, vasoactive amines have the ability to cross into the brain area. This disrupts the blood flow around the brain causing tension in the head.

The Migraine Action Association suggests keeping a diary to try and identify which foods trigger a headache. 'When a headache arrives, immediately record the foods you have eaten. Once you find out which foods bring on the headache, simply leave them out.'

Prevention foods

Many typical headaches occur when the veins around the shoulders, neck and head constrict from stress and tension. Nutritionist Ian Marber believes thinning the blood by eating certain foods will help the blood flow more easily and relieve tension.

Almonds, avocado and wheatgerm contain high levels of Vitamin E. Vitamin E is a natural vasodilator. This widens the blood vessels, which in turn thins blood and allows it to flow more freely around the body, thus unblocking tension.

Almonds can also help reduce inflammation around tissue muscle in the body including the temple and back of the neck. When a headache arrives, eat a palm full - around five or six - of almonds.

Exercises

A classic headache starts in the neck and shoulders and ends as a tight band around the front of the head. Here is a quick desk exercise to help a tense, nervous headache.

Neck stretch: Drop your head forward and let your neck muscles relax. Your chin should rest on the top of your chest. After two minutes, rest your hands on the crown of your head. Let your arms - now in triangular shapes - hang down loosely. This adds weight to the head and increases the stretch.

Herbs

Fever Few is a British herb belonging to the chrysanthemum family. Fever Few is proven to reduce the severity of headaches. This is because it widens the blood vessels, which in turn encourages steady blood flow, relieving tension. This bitter herb, available from health stores, can be chewed, or taken in liquid or tablet form.

Willow, which you can buy in tablet-form from health food shops, contains aspirin-like chemicals called salicylates so is a natural pain killer. You can also buy it in a tincture.