

# Patient information from BMJ

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## Tension-type headache

**Most people get headaches from time to time, and tension-type headaches are among the most common.**

**These headaches are usually fairly mild, and most people are able to get rid of them by taking over-the-counter painkillers, such as paracetamol and ibuprofen. However, if people get these headaches frequently, they may need other treatments.**

**You can use it to talk to your doctor or pharmacist and decide which treatments are right for you.**

### What are tension-type headaches?

Tension-type headaches often happen when you're feeling stressed, tired, or angry. Some doctors think the pain is caused by tension in the muscles of your neck or your head.

For most people, these headaches don't happen often, and they are more of a nuisance than a problem. However, tension-type headaches can become more of an issue if someone gets them frequently - say, at least seven or eight times a month.

### What are the symptoms?

A tension-type headache usually feels like an ordinary headache. Some people say it's as if a band is pressing on both sides of their head. The pain isn't usually throbbing.

Tension-type headaches are different from migraines. For example, unlike migraines, tension-type headaches don't tend to get worse if you move around and don't usually cause nausea and vomiting.

### What treatments work?

Over-the-counter painkillers are the main treatment for relieving occasional tension-type headaches. However, if you get these headaches frequently, you may need treatments to help prevent them.

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## Treatments to relieve tension-type headaches

Many people take over-the-counter **painkillers** to help with the occasional tension-type headache. You may hear these medicines called **analgesics**. They include paracetamol, ibuprofen, and aspirin. Another option is naproxen, which is available on prescription.

But taking painkillers more than a few times a week can actually lead to more headaches. You might hear these called **rebound headaches**.

So you need to be cautious about how often you use these medicines if you get headaches frequently. If you take painkillers regularly, talk to your doctor. They will be able to help you find another treatment.

## Treatments to prevent tension-type headaches

### Things you can try yourself

People who regularly take **exercise** are less likely to get tension-type headaches. If you often get these headaches, you could try walking, swimming, jogging, or cycling to help prevent them.

You could also **keep a diary** of your headaches. This can help you spot the things that trigger your headaches, so you can try to avoid them. Stress and mental tension are common triggers. Other possible triggers include being hungry, and using a computer for a long period of time.

### Medicines to prevent headaches

If you get frequent tension-type headaches (about eight times a month or more) and other things haven't helped, your doctor may recommend taking medicines to help prevent them. These medicines all require a prescription.

Some **antidepressant** drugs can help prevent these headaches. Taking one of these drugs regularly can mean you get fewer headaches. The headaches you do have should also get better faster.

If you have this treatment, your doctor will start you on a low dose and increase it gradually if needed.

You'll probably take an antidepressant for about six months. After this time, your doctor may want to see how you get on without the drug. If your headaches come back, you'll be able to start treatment again.

Antidepressants can cause **side effects**. These can include feeling sleepy, getting a dry mouth, and putting on weight.

Taking antidepressants can make some people, especially those under 18, more likely to think about **suicide or self-harm**. This is more likely in the early stages of your treatment, or if your dose is changed.

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If you're taking an antidepressant and are worried about any thoughts or feelings you have, see your doctor straight away.

Medicines called **muscle relaxants** have been tried for tension-type headaches, but there isn't much evidence that they help. So your doctor is not likely to suggest them.

### Other treatments

There are several non-drug treatments that you might try to help prevent tension-type headaches.

**Cognitive behaviour therapy** is a talking treatment that is sometimes used to help people cope with stress. If your tension-type headaches are triggered by stress, this therapy could help you feel better.

**Relaxation training and biofeedback** are used to teach you how to relax. This could relieve the tension that might be triggering your headaches.

In biofeedback, you wear an electrical device that tells you how tense your muscles are. When you relax, you get a signal, such as a beep. Eventually, you learn to relax without the device.

Some research suggests a treatment called **mindfulness therapy** might also help. This often involves combining meditation, body awareness, and yoga to reduce stress.

Other treatment options include **acupuncture, physiotherapy, and spinal manipulation**. However, there's not much good research on whether these can help.

### What will happen to me?

Tension-type headaches are usually fairly mild. But if they happen a lot, they may interfere with your work or your social life. Getting treatment can help.

Tension-type headaches tend to happen less often as people get older.

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