

# Neurology for You

## Chronic Daily Headache

A *chronic daily headache* develops when a more usual headache continues for an extended period of time (weeks or months) and is very frequent. The headache is typically present for 15 or more days per month. It is a common problem: up to 1 in 20 adults worldwide has a chronic daily headache. Regardless of the cause of the headache, an alteration in pain transmission and processing occurs, resulting in a propagation and prolongation of the pain signals. When this occurs, the headache does not respond well to usual headache treatments such as over the counter pain medications.

Neurologists and primary care physicians commonly see individuals with chronic daily headaches. These headaches eventually resolve (sometimes on their own), but this may take weeks to months and may disrupt the individual's life during that time. To hasten recovery from a



chronic daily headache, Neurologists often prescribe headache prevention medications that are slowly increased and taken daily in order to gradually reduce the severity and frequency of the headaches. Additional medications and non-pharmacologic therapies may help relieve the underlying causes of the headache.

Sometimes testing (MR imaging, lumbar puncture) may be considered, but they are not always necessary.

### How to Manage a Chronic Daily Headache

- Identify your triggers.
- A headache prevention medication can hasten the resolution of the headache by reducing the intensity and frequency of headaches: take this as prescribed by your Neurologist or PCP.
- Avoid taking over the counter pain medications unless specifically instructed by your physician to stop headache episodes. These medications can make chronic daily headaches last longer.
- Heat, muscle relaxants, and gentle exercise may help relieve the muscle spasm that causes tension headaches.
- Triptans and other medications may be used to stop episodic migraines.
- Track your headache with a diary. Write down the time of onset, duration, and severity.

### WHAT CAUSES A CHRONIC DAILY HEADACHE?

*Chronic daily headaches* can arise from any type of headache. The most common headaches are *migraines* and *tension-type* headaches. In both cases, continued exposure to the triggers for these headaches lead to daily headaches. Migraineurs are hypersensitive to numerous stimuli (bright lights, loud noises, strong smells, variable sleep duration and quality, motion sickness) which can trigger severe headaches. Tension-type headaches often develop with neck muscle spasm and aches or with an increase in stress or anxiety. If there are atypical or concerning features of the headaches, an MRI of the Head or lumbar puncture may be considered to exclude these possibilities.

The (usually unintentional) misuse or overuse of pain medications is a very common cause of chronic daily headache. When over the counter pain medications (ibuprofen, naproxen, acetaminophen, etc.) are used more than three times per week, the body develops a type of dependence that prolongs headaches and worsens with withdrawal of the medications called *analgesic rebound*. A similar problem occurs with *caffeine withdrawal* or with overuse of Fioricet which contains caffeine. Lastly, prescribed pain medications such as Tramadol and opiates (codeine, oxycodone, Vicodin, Dilaudid) lead to *opiate overuse headaches*.