

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Making Headway: Coping with Headaches and Migraines

Your head hurts. Again. Though many people automatically reach for medication, there are other steps you can take to avoid that pounding head in the first place, or make it less of a pain once it's arrived. Consider:

Do-it-yourself acupressure. Based on the ancient Chinese healing art of applying moderate pressure to key areas of the body, acupressure is easy to do and is definitely worth a try. Place your thumbs on the back of your head, about 1.5 inches on either side of your skull's midline, below the occipital bone (the main part of your skull). Move your thumbs in a circle firmly.

Applying pressure to the point between the bones in your thumb and index finger is also thought to ease headaches. You may want to ask a friend to help out though as it's more effective when pressure is applied to both hands at the same time.

Getting more zzzzs. Burning the candle at both ends can be hard on your head. Give your head and body the break it deserves: turn off the computer, TV or cell phone and hit the hay instead. Try to get seven to nine hours of sleep a night.

Working up a sweat. Though exercise may be the last thing on your mind when you're battling a headache, it can be a great*preventative* step for those who suffer from tension or stress-related headaches. And of course there are all those other great perks of regular exercise to consider: improved mood, increased energy, a happier heart and a trimmer, toned physique.

Standing and sitting tall. Poor posture can cause unnecessary strain on your back and neck which can result in headaches. When sitting, ensure your feet are flat on the floor, shoulders and back are straight (no hunching forward!) and that your back is well-supported by the chair. Stand a little taller by: putting your weight on the balls of your feet, keeping shoulders straight, your head and neck aligned with your spine, ensuring your arms fall naturally to your side and knees are soft (not locked) and that your feet are about shoulder-width apart.

Steering clear of trigger food and drink. Research suggests that migraines, in particular, can be set off by sensitivities to certain foods. If you know what they are, then it makes sense to avoid these. If you're unsure about whether you have a sensitivity or not, you might want to keep a food log to determine if something you're eating or drinking is setting off your headaches. Common triggers include: chocolate, dairy products, excess caffeine, alcohol (red wine in particular), monosodium glutamate (a.k.a. MSG), nitrates found in preserved meats and fat-laden, fried foods.

Sipping a latte or another caffeinated drink. While too much caffeine can sometimes cause headaches (as can withdrawal from it if you're physically addicted to it) a cup of coffee or spot of tea is thought to ease headaches and has been shown to improve the effectiveness of headache medications by about 40 per cent. In fact, many pain relievers contain caffeine. Using caffeine intake to ease headaches is a bit of a balancing act though, so be sure to limit yourself to a moderate amount of it or you could end up with a bigger headache than you started with.

Consulting a doctor if you suffer from severe migraines or chronic head pain. An exam by your doctor can help rule out more serious causes of your headaches. He or she can also work with you to create an

effective pain management plan that may include prescription medication.
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Preventing headaches and understanding the source of your head pain is an inexact science at best. But by paying close attention to possible triggers—be they food, stress, activity or weather-related—and doing your best to avoid them, you can improve your odds of a headache-free day.