

Tension Headache

What is a tension headache?

A tension headache causes a constant ache and tightness around your forehead, temples, or the back of your head and neck. Usually, pain from a tension headache is mild to moderate and doesn't keep you from performing your daily tasks. However, the pain can sometimes be severe or continuous and disruptive.

These headaches are common and tend to come back, especially when you are under stress. Tension headaches can last anywhere from 30 minutes to several days.

What causes tension headaches?

The cause of tension headaches is not clear. Experts believe there may be more than one factor that causes tension headaches. In the past, doctors believed that tension or spasms in the muscles of the neck, face, jaw, head, or scalp played a role. Now they think a change in brain chemicals may also contribute to tension headaches.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of tension headaches include:

- A constant headache that does not throb or pulse. You usually feel the pain or pressure on both sides of your head.
- Tightness around your forehead that may feel like a "vice grip."
- Aching pain at your temples or the back of your head and neck.

Unlike [migraines](#), tension headaches do not often cause nausea, vomiting, or sensitivity to light and noise, and they are not usually disabling. Tension headaches can last anywhere from 30 minutes to several days. Chronic (recurring) tension headaches occur at least 15 days a month.

How are tension headaches diagnosed?

Your doctor can usually diagnose tension headaches by asking you questions about your health and lifestyle and by examining you. He or she may diagnose tension headaches if you have headache pain on both sides of your head, along with continuous pressure or tightness around your forehead (like a "vice grip"), temples, neck, or back of your head.

How are they treated?

Treatment for tension headaches may include pain relievers that you can buy without a prescription, such as acetaminophen (for example, Tylenol), aspirin, or ibuprofen. You may try additional therapies, including stress management or **biofeedback**, to treat or prevent tension headaches.

To treat chronic tension headaches properly, you and your doctor need to find out what is triggering them—for example, anxiety or depression.

Can tension headaches be prevented?

You may be able to prevent or reduce the frequency of tension headaches by identifying and avoiding the triggers that cause muscle tension, such as **stress**, **anxiety**, fatigue, hunger, anger, poor posture, or overexertion.

Credit – Merrill Hayden

Medical Review – Martin Gabica, MD-Family Medicine and Seymour Diamond, MD-Neurology