



## **OH, MY ACHING HEAD!**

**By Craig Rubenstein, D.C., C.C.N.**

**Headaches. Have you experienced the pain—that banging, throbbing, at times even blinding and nauseating sensation that makes you feel like someone is relentlessly pounding a hammer on our head? You pop some pills in the hopes of soothing the pain, and when the throbbing finally vanishes, you forget the whole thing until the next pain attack arrives—more unmerciful than the previous one.**

**T**hough annoying at best and debilitating at worst, headaches—like any other pain in the body—are great communicators. When the body experiences disturbances it cannot cope with, its warning systems are activated—often resulting in headache pain. This signal, strangely, can be considered a friend, warning us that something is wrong and needs our attention. Covering up the pain and ignoring the warning prevents us from finding the cause of the problem—much like disconnecting a ringing smoke detector and forgetting why the alarm was triggered in the first place.

If you've bounced from doctor to doctor only to be told, "All the tests are negative, and there is no reason for your headaches," try to figure out what lies at the root of your headaches. Instead of numbing out the pain with refillable prescriptions, you'll begin to learn a thing or two about yourself, and may end up headache-free for the rest of your life.

### The Infamous "Migraine Headache"

The term "migraine" evokes fear and dread, yet is surrounded by misconceptions. Although we often apply it to any severe headache, migraines are a very specific type of headache. The pain of a true migraine is caused by a disturbance in the circulation of blood to the brain. The headache that results is usually severe and incapacitating, but may be less intense. True migraines are also preceded by disturbances in vision, hearing, or sense of smell, and often by nausea. Migraine sufferers can usually sense when a migraine is coming on by the way they feel. The key to helping the migraine sufferer find relief is determining and correcting the cause of the blood circulation disturbance to the brain. The potential causes are numerous, ranging from imbalances in the nervous system's control of the blood vessels, to allergic reactions causing blood vessel contraction or dilation.

### Toxic Headache

There are two main types of toxic headaches. The first is caused by environmental or exogenous (outside the body) toxins such as exhaust fumes, insecticides, or carbon monoxide—poisons which must be identified and eliminated. Endogenous (inside the body) toxins are more difficult to identify, and must be carefully evaluated by your natural healthcare doctor.

Toxins within the body build up when they are not eliminated properly and/or overproduced. This toxic overload may trigger a headache as one of its warning signals. Digestive disturbances are a major cause of toxic headaches. When normal digestion fails, undigested food particles begin to rot, and are absorbed into the blood. Improper digestion may be caused by insufficient amounts of stomach acid, pancreatic enzymes, bicarbonate secretion, or bile; abnormally high levels of intestinal yeast; parasites; harmful bacteria; or any combination of these problems.

Detoxification procedures to help eliminate harmful organisms, and supportive digestive aids, as well as hands-on

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reflexology, craniosacral therapy, and acupuncture, are helpful with this type of headache.

### Allergic Headache

Allergies are over-reactions of the body to common elements in our food or environment. Allergens often set off a headache by causing an actual swelling around the brain—similar to the swelling of the eyes, sinus, and nasal tissues during a hay fever attack, except that we are unable to see it. Ideally, the allergen should be removed from any contact with the patient. This is the most common course of treatment, but it is not always possible and often keeps us from looking further.

When the body overreacts, it is important to determine the cause and correct the problem. Two of the most common causes are weakness of the adrenal glands and/or "leaky gut" syndrome. Under normal conditions, the body maintains a system of checks and balances—for example, between the immune system and the adrenals. The adrenal glands suppress the immune system so it will not overreact, and adrenal substances such as adrenaline and cortisone are used medically to treat allergies. The leaky gut syndrome, caused by an overly porous intestine, leads to absorption of tiny undigested or partially digested food particles into the bloodstream. These particles are treated as foreign substances by the body, triggering an immune response that leads to an allergic reaction.

Screening for food intolerances, adrenal functioning, and

leaky gut syndrome through specialized tests is a good start. Treatment, which depends on the outcome of these tests, may include rotation diets, desensitization techniques, and nutritional supplementation.

### Sub-Occipital Neuralgia

Many of us are all too familiar with this headache, which occurs at the base of the skull. Mental tension may increase this type of nervous system irritation, but does not cause it. Sub-occipital neuralgia is the result of abnormal spinal mechanics and muscle dysfunction of the upper neck, and can be treated by returning spinal mechanics and muscular function back to normal.

This type of headache responds wonderfully to traditional chiropractic care.

### Sinus Headaches

Sinus headaches are usually felt just above or below the eyes where the frontal (above) and maxillary (below) sinuses are located. The cause of sinus inflammation may be food, airborne allergies, or low-grade chronic sinus infection. It is important to determine the cause and not just mask the problem by seeking the temporary relief of decongestants. Once the cause of the sinus condition is determined, treatment can begin. Treatments include allergy testing and desensitization, acupuncture or pressure, homeopathy, nutritional and herbal

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regimens, intestinal and/or liver detoxification protocols, and/or cranial and emotional work.

### **Trigger Point Headaches**

“Trigger points” are small regions prone to spasm within a muscle. These areas can cause pain in remote (distant) areas. The most common muscle trigger points related to headaches are found in the upper trapezius muscles between the neck and shoulders and the sternocleidomastoid muscles which run between the inner portion of the collarbone and the skull behind the ears. These trigger points cause the pain, but they also warn us that chronic stress is being placed on these muscles by postural distortions, improper spinal mechanics, or poor work habits. Two common causes are a deficiency of vitamin B12 or an old injury to the area that has not healed properly. The treatment of these headaches involves eliminating these sites—through manual pressure or trigger point injections of an anesthetic—along with proper spinal care to help remove irritation to the muscles containing the trigger points.

### **Acupuncture Meridian Headaches**

Patients sometimes describe headaches by tracing the route of the meridian. Balancing the meridian is of utmost importance to treat these patients. The most common meridians involved in headache pain are those of the gallbladder and urinary bladder. If the headache pain is found only on one side of the head—especially in the temples—the gallbladder meridian is usually involved. If pain extends over the top of the head and is concentrated at the bridge of the nose or around the inner half of one or both eyes, the urinary bladder is usually the cause. Acupuncture, shiatsu or other oriental massage techniques, laser, pressure, or electrical meridian stimulation, visceral manipulation, and various body reflex techniques can be quite helpful in treating these headaches.

### **The Low Blood Sugar Headache**

It is usually easy to diagnose these headaches by linking their occurrence to the timing and types of meals eaten. Treatment involves many elements: Frequent small meals; avoidance of high starch meals, especially in late morning and early afternoon, attention to proper vitamin and mineral supplementation, and attainment of proper function of the pancreas, liver, and adrenal glands to ensure stable blood sugar.


### **Jaw and Cranial Causes of Headaches**

The cranium, once thought to be a solid, immovable mass of bone, is now known to exhibit movement. Research has shown that pain fibers in the areas where cranial bones join can stimulate the sensation of pain in the head where they are located. Natural healthcare practitioners familiar with cranial motion and correction can identify and treat cranial motion problems to relieve this form of headache.

The jaw can be another source of headache pain. If you grind your teeth, or feel popping or clicking with jaw movements, this may be the source of your problem. You may also feel a tremendous tightening of the head on one or both sides due to the spasm of certain powerful jaw muscles. Proper treatment will reduce the jaw dysfunction and muscle spasm. Treatment for this form of headache may involve a dentist, chiropractor, cranial sacral therapist, and/or acupuncturist.

Treatments for headache conditions vary from one practitioner to the next. If allergies are suspected as a cause, blood testing for immediate food, pollen, or mold reactions (RAST testing) can be done. Delayed reaction to these allergens can be conducted through more specialized tests. Other methods include skin testing, provocative testing (exposing the patient to an allergen and watching for behavioral or cognitive changes), and muscle testing procedures, which may be incorporated with more traditional testing to confirm reactions to allergens. Various desensitization techniques ranging from injections, homeopathic remedies, rotation diets, and hands-on techniques, to energy work, acupuncture, herbal and nutritional regimens, and structural corrections can be employed individually or in combination.

Allergens or intolerances may be an element in sinus, toxic, migraine, and trigger point headaches. The nerve irritation that can accompany migraines, sub-occipital neuralgia, jaw, and trigger point headaches can be treated through structural corrections of the spine and jaw, acupuncture or pressure, and other forms of bodywork such as massage and the Alexander Technique.

There are many other varieties of headaches in addition to the types discussed here. Problems such as tumors, nervous system disease, high blood pressure, and emotional factors can all be investigated. The most important point to remember is that the headache is a warning signal, and the cause of this alarm must be discovered and treated. 

*Craig Rubenstein, D.C., C.C.N., is a licensed chiropractor and clinical nutritionist specializing in applied kinesiology, and a Fellow and Diplomate of the International Academy of Clinical Acupuncture. He practices in New York City and Medford, Long Island. For more information, call (212) 213-9494, or (516) 696-2039.*



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