



Cervicogenic Headaches (tension headache)

What are cervicogenic headaches?

Commonly referred to as tension headaches, cervicogenic headaches occur due to tightness in the joints of your neck and tightness in surrounding muscles and soft tissues. A tension headache may feel like a tight band around the head, a dull ache on one or both sides of the head or a heavyweight on top of the head. There may also be aching and tightness in the neck and shoulders. Tension headaches may become worse as the day goes on. It is the most common type of headache. Two out of three people will have at least one tension headache in their lifetime. Some people have tension headaches only once or twice a year, while others may have frequent or even daily headaches.

Why does it happen?

There are many reasons why people get cervicogenic headaches. They can be triggered by factors such as tension, tiredness, poor posture, poor ergonomic set-up, long periods of reading, typing, or concentration (eye strain), poor sleeping position, spine and neck injuries and physical and emotional stress.

What can a physiotherapist do?

The physiotherapist will thoroughly assess your cervical spine and surrounding muscle, and determine which structures are contributing to your headache. Treatment will then aim to help relieve your headache. Treatment techniques involve mobilization of the upper cervical spine and soft tissue massage through the cervical musculature with deep tissue release or dry needling through the active trigger points.

Postural correction is often vital to prevent the re-occurrence of your headaches and in providing long-term relief. The physiotherapist may use postural taping in the initial stages to help relieve the strain through your neck, followed by the development of an exercise program to provide the long-term changes in your posture.

What about work/ activity?

Continuing with work and activity varies depending on the severity of your headaches. Despite the discomfort, most people can normally continue with their usual activities. Your physiotherapist will be able to provide advice regarding correct ergonomics to avoid the stress placed on your neck and prevent headaches.

Self-management principles including stretching, applying heat, moving in and out of sustained positions and maintaining a good posture with a well designed ergonomic set-up are vital to reduce the severity of your headaches. Other helpful tips include: learning ways to manage your stress; finding ways to relax, such as yoga, massage or meditation; having a healthy diet; drinking plenty of water; and exercising regularly – you release 'feel good' chemicals (endorphins) from your brain when you exercise.

Outcome

Physiotherapy treatment in line with self-management principles has excellent results relieving your headache and reducing the frequency and severity of your headaches. If your headaches continue further medical review may be warranted