

## **Heathgate Medical Practice**

### **Self-care leaflet – Headache in adults**

This range of leaflets created by our clinical team provide useful information on a range of conditions that can in most cases be managed by patients at home. Where symptoms persist after a period of self-care or after advice from the local pharmacist, you should consider calling the surgery.

Headache is one of the most common health complaints. All of us will experience headache at some point in time. Most are not caused by serious or sinister conditions and can be treated at home.

#### **Types of headache**

- Tension headache – this is the most common type of headache. It affects both sides of the head and feels like a constant tight band around the head. It can last for several days and can be uncomfortable and tiring. However they do not generally disturb sleep. The exact cause of a tension headache is not clear, but tension headaches can be due to poor posture including excessive time in front of a computer screen, skipping meals, dehydration and sleep disturbance. These traits cause scalp muscles to tense and cause pain. Psychological stress can make this worse. The best treatment is to identify the cause and address it. Simple painkillers such as paracetamol and ibuprofen (please check doses) are helpful but you should avoid codeine based products.
- Migraine is less common than a tension headache. It feels like a severe throbbing pain at the front and side of the head. Many people also have nausea, vomiting and increased sensitivity to light or sound. Some can have visual disturbances. They can sometimes stop you from carrying out normal daily activities. They usually last a couple of hours and some people find that they need to stay in bed for days at a time. Resting in a dark room as well as taking soluble aspirin combined with a medication that increases its absorption can help. A range of medication for migraine is available at the pharmacy.
- Medication over-use headache. This is the third most common cause of headache and caused by taking codeine based painkillers or triptans for tension headaches or migraine attacks. It usually resolves within 2 months of discontinuing medication. Ibuprofen, aspirin and naproxen are less likely to cause headaches.

#### **How to manage my headache?**

There are a number of steps that can be taken to reduce the occurrence and severity of headaches. These include:

- Balanced regular diet
- Regular exercise
- Good rest and recovery
- Good posture
- Drink plenty of water
- Manage stress levels using coping strategies
- Quit smoking
- Manage alcohol intake

### **When you should see a healthcare professional?**

You should consider seeking professional advice when you have a headache in combination with any of these other symptoms:

- Your jaw hurts when eating
- Blurred, double vision or loss of vision
- Problems with speech or confusion
- High temperature, feeling shivery, and have a stiff neck or rash
- Your headache started when you coughed, sneezed or strained
- Your headache is worse when you sit or stand
- Red and painful eyes
- If you have low immunity or are on immune suppressant medications
- You have or have had a type of cancer that can spread through the body

**Further advice on managing headaches is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)**