

Headaches

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Headaches are one of the most common experiences of humankind, recorded in the Bible, and affecting children as well as adults. While all headaches have a commonality, pain in the head, the various dimensions of the pain, and the associated suffering and disability vary.

Over the last century, there has been increasing knowledge about the physiology of headaches, with different classifications. However, these explanations often fall short and are constantly being modified. For example, for many years, it was thought that migraine was caused by problems with the blood vessels in the brain; however that has been disproven and now it is believed to be due to problems with a certain region of the brain itself, similar to the mechanism of epilepsy.

While conventional medications can bring on effective relief, they often have significant limitations and associated toxicity. The holistic approach to headache is the last resort for some; for others the first; and often can find and remedy root causes.

There are several dimensions of headache that need to be specified in order to establish a diagnosis and monitor response to treatment. The first dimension is the intensity of the pain. This is usually quantified on a pain scale of 0 to 100. The next dimension is the degree of suffering—i.e. how disabling the pain is. While pain is the sensory experience, the suffering is the emotional and functional consequence of the pain. Some pains are very intense, such as childbirth, but because the context is positive (i.e. time-limited, associated with the delivery of a child and the end of the discomfort of pregnancy), the suffering is usually moderate. One sibling hitting another can cause little real pain but lots of suffering, especially when perceived as being unfair or abusive.

The third dimension is the newness of the pain—i.e. is it a new pain or a recurrent pain. A new moderate pain may have more significance than a severe recurrent pain that already has been medically evaluated. The fourth dimension is the frequency of the pain—how often it occurs. The fifth is the duration of the pain, when it comes, as well as overall temporal pattern. The sixth is the variability of the pain—how much it varies in the timing, location, and other qualities. The seventh is exacerbating factors—what makes it worse. The eighth is relieving factors—what makes it better and how much. The ninth is associated factors, such as a specific environment or food.

Logging these dimensions on a weekly and monthly basis sometimes reveals a pattern. Often there is more than

one pattern or pain that may have not been apparent prior to tracking. Based on these nine dimensions, as well as other historical information, laboratory studies and physical exam, a physician will classify a headache into one of several types. A main diagnostic sub typing is whether the headache is secondary (caused by something else) or primary (no cause found). While occasionally a reversible cause is identified, such as Lyme disease, a cause usually is not found and treatment is based on “management” of symptoms. Certain patterns of headache, such as migraine, will guide treatment, such as the use of specific types of medications. Other times, the classification doesn’t help much (see prior article entitled “Fallacy of Diagnosis”). .

Holistic Evaluation

In holistic medicine there is a separation of “triggers” from the headache itself. Very often the headache is perceived as being random, or has some variability that is not understood. However, any variability is a clue, and is monitored until a pattern, or a series of patterns emerges. Often the headache is multi-factorial, like a web, with not a single factor, but a constellation of factors that determine the onset, intensity, duration and response. Most patients, with the help of a practitioner, can identify such factors and patterns.

The holistic evaluation of headache is extensive. Food and sleep diaries, relationships, job, environment, and many other factors are explored in detail. Exploration of history often goes back to childhood and to the family lineage.

It is practical to think of the triggers/causes of headache in three interactive areas. The first is nutritional deficiency. Most of the population is deficient in magnesium and

vitamin D. Other common deficiencies include vitamin B12, omega-3 fatty acids (fish oils) and sleep. Any of these deficiencies, and others, can be a trigger or cause of headaches.

The next region of the interactive web is toxicities. The most common are lead, mercury, yeast toxicity, toxicity from foods and environment, and allergies to food and environment. The main difference between toxicity and allergy is that in toxicity, the magnitude of the problem is proportional to the amount of toxin. In allergy, there can be a reaction to a single molecule of a substance; with a very different biochemical process than with toxins.

The third region of the causal web is stress. It is helpful to think of stress as of two types: physiological and psycho-spiritual. The physiological type has been already

Factors/Triggers for Headaches

Allergy to Outdoors (Seasonal)
Allergy to Food
Allergy to Household
Anxiety/Panic
Coffee
Depression
Hormonal Imbalance
Hypoglycemia
Light
Menstrual Cycle
Muscle Tension/Pain
Nutritional Deficiency
Post-Traumatic Stress
Rebound
Response to Remedies
Sensory Stimulation
Smells (Tastes)
Sound/Noise
Stress
Sleep Deprivation
Specific Compounds
Temperature/Weather
Tension
Toxins:
environment
food
internal (endo-)

discussed and consists of deficiency and toxicity. The psycho-spiritual type is related to life stress. This can include relationships, health of self and family, economic and social/community (including wars, hurricanes and oil spills). Stress causes a host of physiological changes to the hormonal, neurotransmitter and immune systems that can easily trigger or perpetuate headaches.

Many people who have had prior treatment failures have multiple deficiencies, toxins and allergies, and stressors. Each synergizes with the other. Many of the biochemical, metabolic and physiological tests necessary to identify factors are “covered” by health insurance; some are not. The most important “alternative” tests are for heavy metal toxicity, yeast and parasites, hormonal imbalance and in some cases food allergy. The cost of these tests is often recouped with reduction of medications, physician visits, productivity and quality of life.

Holistic Treatment

Improving headaches at a root-cause level requires a multi-dimensional approach. Often there are important changes in lifestyle, which includes improved sleep hygiene (more consistent and quality sleep), regular stress reduction with a classic (not gym) yoga class, gentle walks, and other restorative activities. There needs to be a balance between work and play. These are not optional in most cases where a patient is seeking optimal results.

Lifestyle changes also often include changes in nutrition, with the reduction of pro-inflammatory, highly processed conventional foods. At the least, all artificial sugars, MSG, high-fructose corn syrup and food dyes should be removed. Alcohol and caffeine should be reduced, or temporarily eliminated. Conventional highly-pesticide laden produce, such as apples, peaches, celery, etc (see references) must be completely eliminated. Elimination of dairy, other animal products, gluten, soy, or corn in some cases can enable a dramatic reduction in frequency and intensity of headaches. Sometime, more formal and multi-phase elimination and detoxification programs are required.

When lab tests demonstrate specific deficiencies or toxicities appropriate supplementation, detoxification, and treatment of offending organisms are important. Headaches often respond to supplementation with magnesium, vitamin B2 (riboflavin), vitamin D, vitamin B12, and fish oils. Traditional herbals such as feverfew and butterbur are worthy of trial. Repeat testing is important to measure the magnitude and rate of response to interventions, since simply taking supplements or “doing a detox” for a few months may not solve some underlying deficiencies or toxicities. Often there are surprises. For example, after clearing a parasite, a bacterial imbalance might occur. Or after detoxification of lead, mercury begins to clear.

Some people hold energetic traces of past physical injuries, emotional traumas, and sometimes more obscure familial “karmic” traces in their bodies, which can include the muscles, joints, acupuncture meridians or yogic

chakras. Working in the psycho-spiritual-energetic plane, though esoteric, may be essential for continued healing in such a situation. This plane can be approached by yoga practice, acupuncture, EMDR, Reiki, and other mind-body-energy techniques.

An organized multi-dimensional approach using the best of conventional and holistic medicine can often improve the quality of life for those who suffer from headaches, even if present for decades.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This educational material may not be used to make decisions about medical care without the help of an experienced practitioner.

For More Information (Books followed by ISBN #'s)

- O See Dr. Cheikin's website, www.cheikin.com, for related articles on: Fallacy of Diagnosis, Stress, Chronic Pain, Heavy Metals, An Inconvenient Life, as well as other topics and holistic health information.
- O Dr. Cheikin offers workshops in several holistic health topics for adults and children. Please call for more information.
- O Ballentine, Rudolph: Radical Healing: Integrating the World's Greatest Therapeutic Traditions... Three Rivers, 2000. 0609-804-847
- O Pitchford, Paul: Healing with Whole Food: Asian Traditions and Modern Nutrition, 3rd Ed. North Atlantic, 2002. 1556-434-308.
- O Peck, M. Scott: Road Less Traveled. New York: Touchstone, 1978 (1997). 0684-847-248
- O Sivananda Center: The Sivananda Companion to Yoga. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983. ISBN: 0684-870-002.
- O See the Environmental Working Group's web site, www.ewg.org for a list of the most and least toxic produce, fish, cosmetics, and other products.

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