

'Health is harmony; disease is discord'*– Aristotle –*

When we are stressed we subconsciously tense our shoulders, head and neck muscles. Nine out of ten headaches are tension headaches, or are due to contractions or stretching of muscles in the neck, shoulders and scalp – particularly the frontalis and temporalis muscles. These muscles must relax before pain can retreat. The other major type of headache is migraine headache, often occurring on one side of the head and sometimes associated with nausea and vomiting. Migraine headache is due to vasodilatation or swelling of blood vessels and tissues surrounding the brain. Vasodilatation and the pain that goes with it are thought to be caused by the release of the stress hormone serotonin. In reality there is often not a very clear distinction between these two types of headache. Both can be caused by a variety of triggers either emotional or physical.

Certain physical triggers which need to be excluded include: poor eyesight or a weakness in certain eye muscles, causing you to strain the other muscles to maintain normal binocular vision; sinus trouble or catarrh, which makes your head feel blocked up; menopause and menstruation; high blood pressure.

■ Ways of reducing headache

- ① **Keep a headache diary:** Record when and where your headache occurs. Look for a pattern and potential triggers.
- ② **Relaxation:** Progressive muscle relaxation training where muscle groups are first tensed and then relaxed has been shown to be effective especially if focused on the head, neck and shoulder muscles.
- ③ **Massage and movement:** Massage the temples, squeezing gently at the base of the neck, resting your palms on closed eyes and pressing your finger tips on the side of your head above the eyes. Sometimes just moving around to music stretching the muscles in the neck and head can also help.
- ④ **Hot and cold:** A warm bath, a hot water bottle on the neck, a warm towel on the head or face, or a cold flannel or cold compress can all help to relax muscles.
- ⑤ **Diet:** Headache and migraine in particular can be caused by trigger foods such as chocolate, cheese, dairy products, alcohol (most noticeably red wine), caffeine (in coffee, tea and cola), fried food, citrus fruits and nuts.
- ⑥ **Low blood sugar:** Headaches can also be linked to low blood sugar so beware of skipping meals. Always have breakfast. Do not replace meals with sugary snacks. Sometimes having a bite to eat can prevent a headache.
- ⑦ **Relaxation:** Alter your stressful lifestyle and introduce more times of relaxation.
- ⑧ **Retreat:** Some people find it helpful to lie down in a darkened room and relax or sleep.
- ⑨ **Scents and salts:** Lavender oil, vapour rub, or other aromatic oil placed on finger tip and massaged gently into the temples, or placed on the pillow at night, can often lift away oppressive aches and tensions.