

Practicing relaxation techniques

Relaxation techniques are very effective for controlling chronic headaches. These techniques have been shown to be very effective during pregnancy and while nursing. Interestingly, headache reduction from relaxation techniques is just as good as that from typical headache medications. The good news is you don't have to worry about medication exposure with relaxation.

You may be planning to learn breathing techniques, like Lamaze, to help control your pain when your baby is delivered. You will learn these skills months before you will actually use them to control pain at the time of delivery. No one can learn these techniques once they're in the middle of having contractions. Similarly, you have to first practice headache-relieving relaxation techniques when you don't have a bad headache. You should practice these skills several times daily until you feel you have developed a good ability to achieve a relaxed state. Then you can use them effectively to help control headache pain when a headache first begins.

Relaxation techniques work by getting your brain to turn on pain-relieving centers. Relaxation techniques release the same brain chemicals that control headaches when you take headache medications. This is why these techniques are so helpful. So it's not a matter of "chilling out" or "letting things roll off of your back." Relaxation techniques are really a way to tap into your body's natural pain-relieving pathways.

Tips for performing relaxation techniques

- Relaxation techniques should be learned while sitting in a comfortable chair, with arms and legs uncrossed, feet flat on the floor, and eyes closed.
- Each practice session should last for about 15–20 uninterrupted minutes.
- Once you have regularly practiced and mastered these techniques, you will be able to use them whenever you feel yourself starting to tense or in anticipation of stress.
- Several effective techniques are progressive muscle relaxation, cue-controlled relaxation, and thermal biofeedback. Each is described below.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation involves alternately contracting and relaxing muscles throughout your body.

- Close your eyes and practice first tensing and then relaxing individual muscles in different parts of your body, starting at your feet and moving toward your neck and face.
- Hold the tension for 10–15 seconds, and then release it.
- Tense and release the muscles in your legs, then abdomen, then arms, then shoulders, then neck, then jaw, then eyes, then forehead.

- Focus on how the muscles feel when they are no longer tensed.
- When you are familiar with this exercise, you will begin to recognize when your muscles are unusually tense, even if you don't feel "stressed." For example, you may notice jaw and neck tightness when sitting in traffic or waiting in a line at the store. Once you feel this tightness, work to relax it as you do during your quiet training sessions.

Cue-controlled relaxation

Cue-controlled relaxation uses a combination of deep breathing and repetition of the word "relax."

- Begin this exercise with a slow, deep, abdominal breath.
- Place your hand over your abdomen to make sure that it is moving in and out with each breath. After breathing in, hold your breath for 5–10 seconds, then breathe out, slowly repeating the word "relax." Repeat.
- After you are comfortable with this method, you should be able to close your eyes and take a deep breath as above before dealing with stressful situations, like a doctor's visit, a meeting with the boss, or a discussion with your spouse. This will relax your system and reduce the effect of the stressful situation on your pain-provoking mechanisms and headaches.

Thermal biofeedback

Place a handheld thermometer on your finger and measure the temperature.

- Focus on raising your finger temperature by 2–3 degrees Fahrenheit (probably to about 96 degrees) while practicing relaxation techniques.
- Some people find that it's difficult to "feel" relaxed. Using biofeedback can help show you when you are getting relaxed. If you are turning on and turning off the right pathways in your brain and nervous system, this will result in a feeling of calm, higher skin temperatures, and, most importantly, the blocking of pain messages.
- An inexpensive finger thermometer and biofeedback audiotape may be obtained from Primary Care Network (1-800-769-7565).