

## ***What non-drug treatments are effective for treating headaches?***

Non-drug acute headache treatments are designed to block pain messages by sending other signals through the nerves and spinal cord. It's hard for your brain to focus on one thing when it's bombarded with lots of other signals. Pain management techniques are designed to overload brain circuits, blocking transmission of migraine signals. This is similar to having difficulty balancing your checkbook when the television's blaring, the phone is ringing, and toddlers are running through the house. When your brain is occupied with relaxation techniques, moving joints and muscles, or focusing on other activities, it's harder for the brain to have enough excess capacity to also transmit pain messages.

Try to combine several of the following techniques together to maximize the headache relief benefit. Don't be discouraged if these techniques don't always work. Try to use them before your migraine becomes severe. You can also use these in conjunction with doctor-approved migraine medications.

- Apply heat or ice (whichever you find more soothing) for 20 minutes to your temples or neck.
- Begin relaxation techniques: deep breathing, imagery, or biofeedback. Ask your provider if he/she can recommend a local expert who specializes in teaching these techniques.
- Include positive messages about good expectations.
- Do oscillatory movements (described in *Headache-reducing exercises* handout).
- Perform exercises that stretch your painful area. Be sure to stretch slowly, and only to the point of first feeling a stretching sensation.
- Use distraction techniques.
- Try acupuncture.
- If other treatments aren't helping, some people find their headache goes away after a nap. See if sleep can turn off your headache.

### *Relaxation and biofeedback*

- Progressive muscle relaxation involves alternatively 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 the sensations of the muscles when they are no longer tensed. When you are familiar with this exercise, you will begin to recognize when your muscles are abnormally tensed, even if you don't feel "stressed." For example, you may notice jaw and neck tension when sitting in traffic or waiting in a line at the store. Once you feel this tension, work to release it.

- 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 ensure that it is moving in and out with each breath. After inhaling, hold for 5–10 seconds, then exhale, slowly repeating the word “relax.” Repeat. After you are comfortable with this technique, you should be able to close your eyes and take a deep breath as above before confronting stressful situations, like a doctor’s visit, meeting with the boss, or discussion with your spouse. This will relax your system to reduce the impact of the stressful situations on your pain-provoking physiology and headaches.

### *Cognitive restructuring*

- Replace negative, catastrophic thinking with positive, helpful messages:
  - Instead of thinking, “My day is ruined now,” tell yourself, “This migraine will become more manageable soon.”
  - Instead of, “Nothing ever gets rid of my migraine,” tell yourself, “If I use my acute migraine treatments, the pain will improve soon.”
  - Instead of, “Life’s not fair. Why me?” remind yourself, “I have good tools to help control my migraine.”

### *Distraction*

- Many people suggest lying down in a quiet room when a migraine starts. While this may be necessary when the pain is very severe, you want to try to distract your brain by increasing pleasant stimulation when a migraine starts. When your migraine is still mild-to-moderate, try going for a walk outside, singing to the radio, taking a bike ride, hitting a few golf balls in the backyard, tossing the ball to your dog, or some other pleasurable activity. Avoid activities that are frustrating, require substantial mental exertion, or don’t require active engagement (like television viewing).

### *Heat, ice, and neck stretches*

- Apply heat or ice (whichever you find more soothing) for 20 minutes to the neck and shoulders.
- Positional distraction: Place a 1- to 2-inch high stack of books on the floor. Lie on the floor, with the back of your head resting on the books. The edge of the books should be near the middle of your head, so that your neck is free. Relax so that your head moves up from your neck.
- Trigger point compression: You may notice certain spots on your neck muscles that aggravate your pain when you press them. These are called trigger points. Apply pressure to any trigger points with your fingers and hold for 12–60 seconds. Release the pressure, and proceed with your usual stretching exercises. Some physical therapists recommend a Theracane ([www.theracane.com](http://www.theracane.com)) to help apply pressure to hard-to-reach trigger points.
- Oscillatory movements: perform slow, gentle, rhythmic, side-to-side movements of the neck. Face forward and turn your head 1–2 inches, turning

away from the painful side. Return to facing forward. Repeat at a rate of about one turn per second, for a total of 30 seconds. Rest for 30 seconds; then repeat until no further relief is noted. Now turn your head toward the painful side and back, as above.

- Perform neck stretches (described in *Headache-reducing exercises* handout).

### *Acupressure*

- Find a depression in the middle of your neck between the neck muscles and move up within this depression to where the neck meets the skull. Rub the area where the neck muscles attach to the skull firmly for 2–3 minutes with deep circular movements.
- Find a depression at each temple, immediately behind your eyebrows. Rub firmly and deeply for 1 minute.
- Find a depression between your eyebrows. Rub firmly and deeply for 1 minute.
- Find the muscle that lies in the web between your thumb and index finger by compressing this area with the thumb and index finger from your other hand. Deeply and firmly make circular motions over this area for 5 minutes. Repeat with your other hand.

### *Sleep*

- Going to bed with a migraine should be reserved for severe episodes associated with nausea that prevents physical activity.
- Sleep can effectively shut off serotonin-activated pain pathways. Some people find a 1-hour nap effectively relieves their migraine. Unless your headache is severe, avoid bed unless you also experience fairly prompt headache relief from brief sleep.