



**University
Hospitals Sussex**
NHS Foundation Trust

Headaches

Accident and emergency

Patient information

What are headaches?

Headaches are pains that occur in any region of the head. They can occur on both sides of the head or be isolated to a certain location.

Headaches are very common. In most cases, they are not caused by anything serious. However, they can still be painful and disruptive.

You have been assessed in the Emergency Department, and we do not believe your headache is due to a life-threatening cause.

If your headaches continue or affect your daily life, you should speak to your GP. They can refer you to a specialist if needed.

Over-the-counter painkillers and simple lifestyle changes (like getting enough rest and staying hydrated) can help manage your symptoms.

Types of headache

Tension headaches

The most common type of headache

- Feels like a tight band around both sides of your head.
- They usually last 30 minutes to several hours but can persist for several days.
- Common triggers include stress, poor posture, skipping meals, and dehydration.
- Ordinary painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen are effective.
- Lifestyle changes like regular sleep, stress reduction, and staying hydrated can help prevent tension headaches.

Migraines

Felt as severe, throbbing pain, typically at the front or side of the head.

- May come with nausea, vomiting, and sensitivity to light or sound.

- Migraines can last hours or even days and may prevent normal daily activities.
- Over-the-counter painkillers are most effective if taken at the first sign of a migraine.

Cluster headaches

- A rare but very painful type of headache. They usually cause pain around one eye, often with redness, watering, and a blocked or runny nose.
- These occur in clusters over weeks or months, often at the same time of year.

Painkillers

- Over-the-counter options like paracetamol, ibuprofen, or aspirin can help manage symptoms.
- For migraines, take medication early for best results.
- Soluble painkillers or suppositories may be useful if swallowing is difficult.

Self-care for headaches

You can reduce the risk and severity of headaches by following these steps:

- Apply a heat or ice pack to your head or neck (avoid extreme temperatures).
- Reduce stress and develop healthy coping strategies.
- Have regular meals and stay hydrated.
- Exercise regularly and get enough sleep.
- Reduce screen time where possible.
- Visit an optician to rule out eye strain.
- Ensure gas appliances are safety-checked for carbon monoxide if headaches worsen at home. methods recommended for treating headaches are rest and over-the-counter pain relief.

When to seek medical help

Call 999 or go to the Emergency Department if you have:

- A sudden and extremely painful headache, especially if it came on quickly.
- A headache following a serious head injury, such as from a fall or accident.
- A severe headache with any of these symptoms:
 - Sudden problems speaking or remembering things.
 - Loss of vision.
 - You are feeling confused or drowsy
 - You have fainted
 - High fever, shivering, stiff neck, or a rash.
 - Arm or leg weakness, or facial drooping.
 - The white part of your eye is red
 - You feel sick, vomit and find light or noise painful.
 - You feel weak
 - Your scalp feels sore.
 - Your jaw hurts while eating.
 - You experience blurred or double vision.

Further support

For general medical advice please use the NHS website, the **NHS 111** service, walk-in-centres, or your GP.

The **NHS website** www.nhs.uk/ provides online health information and guidance.

There are walk-in and urgent treatment services at Brighton Station, Crawley Urgent Treatment Centre, Lewes Victoria Hospital, Horsham Minor Injuries Unit and Bognor Regis War Memorial Hospital.

This information is intended for patients receiving care in Brighton & Hove or Haywards Heath.

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