

Emergency department

Headache advice

Information for patients, relatives and carers

Introduction

Headaches are a very common problem which will affect almost everyone at some point in their life and are one of the most common reasons to see your GP or attend A&E. Although they can be painful and upsetting most headaches are not due to a serious condition (this is referred to in medical terms as a benign headache). The most common worry that many people have is that their headache may be a symptom of a brain tumour but this is very rare.

There are several types of headache, and it is important to understand which type of headache you have.

Migraine

- A one-sided throbbing headache
- So painful that you can no longer do your usual activities such as going to work
- You may feel like vomiting
- It is common to dislike bright lights or noises
- Many patients find that going to sleep in a quiet dark room helps to settle the headache
- Usually gets better within 4-72 hours

Cluster headache

- Reoccurring headache
- One-sided headache
- Occurs with a red watery eye as well as a runny or blocked nose
- Usually gets better by itself within a few hours but may keep coming back

Tension headaches

- Tight band-like sensation usually across the forehead
- Usually worse as the day progresses but it should not stop you sleeping
- Usually gets better with over the counter tablets such as paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin
- Usually gets better anytime between 30 minutes and 7 days

Medication over-use headache

- Most common with painkillers such as codeine, dihydrocodeine, tramadol and morphine
- Unfortunately, when painkiller medications are taken regularly, the body responds by making more pain sensors in the head so that, eventually, there are so many pain sensors the head is super sensitive and the headache will not go away and will continue as long as you keep taking painkillers
- People with this type of headache will often take more or higher doses of painkillers which will only make the problem worse

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- The only way to treat this type of headache is by stopping the painkillers which are causing the problem
 - This is an important type of headache to be aware of as even people who suffer from another type of headache, such as migraine, can go on to develop these headaches if painkillers are used too often. This is most common with opioid painkillers such as codeine, dihydrocodeine, tramadol and morphine

Warning signs

Please go back to A&E if you develop any of the following symptoms:

- headaches accompanied by a high temperature (fever)
- a sudden, very severe headache which reaches its peak in just a few seconds
- headaches with weakness or abnormal sensations in your face, arms or legs or difficulty speaking
- confusion
- a red or painful eye or any change to your vision

What you can do to help stop or ease headaches

Things that will help no matter what type of headache you have:

1. Drink more water
2. Cut down the amount of caffeine and alcohol you drink
3. Make sure your eye tests are up-to-date
4. Get plenty of sleep
5. Reduce the amount of time you spend on laptops, tablets and mobile telephones
6. Reducing your stress levels
7. Do more physical activity
8. If you have a gas boiler, check that your carbon monoxide detector is working

Further information

Patient.co.uk: <https://patient.info/health/headache-leaflet>

Useful emergency contacts

St Mary's Hospital's emergency department

South Wharf Road
London W2 1NY
Telephone 020 3312 6330

Charing Cross Hospital's emergency department

Fulham Palace Road
London W6 8RF
Telephone 020 3311 1005

Hammersmith Hospital's emergency department

Du Cane Road
London W12 0HS
Telephone 020 3313 4691

Eye emergencies (24-hour)

Western Eye Hospital
171 Marylebone Road
London NW1 5YE
Telephone 020 3312 3241

NHS 111

If you have an urgent medical problem and are not sure what to do, call 111 and speak to a fully trained adviser. Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Alcohol liaison nurses

Charing Cross and Hammersmith hospitals: 020 3313 0244
St Mary's Hospital: 020 3312 7663

Drinkline

Free helpline: 0300 123 1110 (weekdays 09.00–20.00, weekends 11.00–16.00)

Sexual health clinic

Jefferiss wing
St Mary's Hospital
Praed Street
London W2 1NY
Telephone: 020 3312 1697 (general enquiries)
020 3312 7583 (sexual health and HIV advice)

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3313 0088** (Charing Cross, Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea hospitals), or **020 3312 7777** (St Mary's and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at **imperial.pals@nhs.net** The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department
Fourth floor
Salton House
St Mary's Hospital
Praed Street
London W2 1NY

Email: **ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net**

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team:
imperial.communications@nhs.net

Wi-fi

We have a free wi-fi service for basic filtered browsing and a premium wi-fi service (requiring payment) at each of our five hospitals. Look for WiFiSPARK_FREE or WiFiSPARK_PREMIUM