

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

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### **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**

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## 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](mailto: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

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