

Headaches: A Pain in the Neck **by Alex C. Minten DPT, CMTPT** **Orthopedic & Spine Therapy of Kaukauna**

Headaches are a very common problem that can significantly impair a person's activity tolerance, productivity, and overall day-to-day function. In fact, nearly half of the earth's population suffers from some form of headache in a given year, with women being affected up to four times more than men. Unfortunately many of these people, both men and women, suffering from headaches simply tolerate and accept them as part of their daily life. This article will examine common symptoms associated with headaches, their potential link to neck pain, and treatment solutions that can help people lessen and even eliminate their headache symptoms.

Headaches and Neck Pain/Impairment

There are several different types of headaches that can have pain from many different origins including muscles, nerves, joints, and blood vessels among others. Furthermore the variability in symptom presentation and intensity can make diagnosing and treating them fairly complicated. One common finding in individuals with headaches is the presence of neck pain. Headache types that are commonly associated with neck pain include tension headaches, migraines, and cervicogenic headaches (which literally means caused by the neck). Some studies have found that up to 75% of individuals suffering from a migraine also report neck pain/tightness/stiffness/throbbing. So why do people develop headaches with neck pain? Onset of symptoms can result from many different activities and other health factors such as stress, eyestrain, injuries, anxiety, and poor posture, such as those often observed in people with desk jobs. A thorough evaluation is often needed to determine the exact causes of a person's symptoms and establish a treatment plan.

Identifying the Causes and Symptoms Associated with Headaches

As previously mentioned, symptoms of headaches can vary widely however it is important to be aware of your symptoms so that they can be better described when being evaluated. Many people experiencing headaches complain of a constant achiness, pressure, or tightness that can be felt on either one side or both sides of the head. Please see the diagram below for common areas of pain. Symptoms may also include nausea, light sensitivity, dizziness, and/or pain radiating to the shoulder.

When experiencing headaches people should also be aware of the following "red flag" symptoms which are symptoms that require immediate evaluation by a medical doctor:

- Headaches that are getting worse over time
- Sudden onset of severe, maximal headache
- Headaches that worsen with exertion
- Headache that changes with position change
- Accompanied by fever, rash, chills or weight loss
- New headaches after the age of 40
- Other symptoms such as profound dizziness, confusion, weakness, facial tingling

When being evaluated by a physician or physical therapist for headache symptoms individuals should expect a thorough questioning about current health and past medical history. There will also be a series of physical tests performed to gather baseline measurements and identify any motions or activities that worsen pain symptoms. When being evaluated by a medical doctor, diagnostic imaging may also be performed.

Treatment of Headaches Associated with Neck Pain

The best treatment for headache symptoms is a multifaceted approach that includes multiple forms of intervention. Medications are frequently used to manage pain symptoms. Other forms of intervention provided by a medical doctor may include injections, dietary modification, and occasionally surgery. From a therapeutic perspective, there are many things that a physical therapist does to address headaches and associated symptoms. Physical therapists address contributing factors related to trigger points in the muscles of the head and neck, joint dysfunction in the cervical spine, postural dysfunction, and will also assist in transition to an independent home program.

Recommendations for Those Experiencing Headaches

There are many different types of headaches that may or may not be related to neck pain or other musculoskeletal impairments. Individuals with headache symptoms matching those described in this article are encouraged to consult with a physician and/or physical therapist prior to seeking treatment.

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