



## Pharmacy Self Care Health Facts Column

By John Bell - 10 2008

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### Preventing migraine and other pain

A headache is something that almost every one of us gets from time to time. In fact, studies have shown that more than 30% of Australians experience a headache at least once a month; and about 5% of the population gets a headache on a daily basis.

So National Headache and Migraine Awareness Week, 22-27 September, should have universal interest.

Of course, headache is simply a symptom of an underlying cause. And this cause needs to be identified in order to select the most effective treatment.

While the exact reason why headaches occur is still unclear, medical evidence suggests that a headache originates from the pain-sensitive blood vessels at the base of the brain.

What is clear is that there are certain factors – trigger factors – which can provoke headache. These triggers aren't the same for everyone and at different times they may even be different for the same person. However, commonly they include stress, tension and anxiety. Headaches could be related to hormone level changes; perhaps at the time of periods, during pregnancy or while taking oral contraceptive or hormone replacement therapy. Factors as simple as delaying or missing meals, coffee withdrawal or too much alcohol can trigger headaches.

Irregular sleep problems, as in too much or too little sleep, or 'jet lag' associated with international travel or shift work, can also trigger headaches; as can weather or altitude changes, strong smells or fumes and stuffy smoke-filled rooms. Certain medicines can trigger headaches as well.

Just about everything you want to know about headache is available by way of the Self Care fact cards – available at pharmacies throughout Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. There are cards titled *Pain relievers*, *Headache* and *Migraine*.

Migraine is one of the four most common types of headache. The others are tension headache, sinus headache and cluster headaches. And these are all described on the fact cards; with suggestions as to the most appropriate treatment. Remember, migraine is sometimes incorrectly self diagnosed. It is not just a very bad headache. It's a specific condition usually presenting as a severe throbbing headache, often accompanied by other symptoms such as nausea and vomiting. It is usually felt on one side of the head. Some people have warning signs (so-called aura symptoms), up to an hour before the headache starts. These might be flashing lights or a feeling of tingling or numbness.

Avoiding headaches is a better option than having to treat them when they occur. This usually involves some minor changes to lifestyle – learning to relax, keeping fit, having a regular sleep pattern and regular exercise, and being moderate with eating and drinking habits. (The *Relaxation techniques* fact card may be a good one to have a look at, too).

Meanwhile, a report published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* earlier this month suggests that some migraine sufferers may be missing out on effective prevention remedies. According to Honorary Associate Professor Richard Stark from the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne, there is strong evidence for benefit from several medicines originally developed for conditions other than migraine.

Products previously used as treatments for epilepsy, high blood pressure and depression show great promise in migraine prevention.

When medication is required to treat headache, the choices are generally between aspirin, paracetamol and ibuprofen; or perhaps one of these combined with codeine for more severe pain. The combination of paracetamol with metoclopramide (an anti-nauseant medicine) is a useful non-prescription product now available to treat migraine or "sick headache".

Paracetamol is considered safe in recommended doses, but beware the possibility of inadvertent overdose when paracetamol from different sources is taken together; for example, when prescribed for arthritis, when purchased without prescription for headache and/or cough-cold treatments.

So when you next have a headache, check with your pharmacist first for the most appropriate treatment; and ask for the fact cards. Phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 for the location of your nearest Self Care pharmacy.

Insert Pharmacy Name]

[insert Pharmacy Address]

Ph: [insert Contact Phone] Fax [insert Fax No.]

Email: [insert pharmacy email address]