

# Headache Treatment Checklist

Some of these strategies may be familiar to you. Please take your time to learn about how these items may affect your headache and what lifestyle changes you can make to improve your headache condition. These are not in order of importance.

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## Be Aware of Medication Overuse

Limit your use of over-the-counter medications to prevent medication overuse headaches or rebound headaches.

**What drugs can be overused?**

- This can occur with over-the- counter pain medicines, such as Tylenol, Ibuprofen, Advil, and Excedrin. It can also happen with p rescription medications used to stop headaches like triptans (e.g., sumatriptan), butalbital combinations (e.g., Fioricet), and opioids (e.g., Norco).

**How much is too much?**

- If you have been taking these medications for more than 2-3 days per week (or more than 10 days per month) for at least three months, then it is very possible that taking these medicines are causing, or are at least contributing to, your headaches. Limit your use to less than 10 days a month.

**Rebound headaches and how to stop them:**

- You may be experiencing rebound headaches if you wake up with a headache, don't find medication to be effective, or if you notice headache pain returns or worsens after the medication wears off. To stop this, you should stop using medications contributing to rebound. Instead, reply on self-care methods and additional items on the headache treatment checklist.

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## Monitor Your Water Intake

Even slight dehydration can cause a headache. So, it’s important to monitor how much water you have daily and aim to drink enough water to meet your body’s needs.

**How much water should you drink daily?**

- Generally, you should be aiming to drink 6 to 8 glasses of water on a daily basis.

**How dehydration causes headaches:**

- Dehydration is closely related to headache frequency, severity, and duration. Dehydration can cause headaches in anyone, including people who don’t experience chronic headaches. Adequate levels of water in the body can help to balance the concentration of materials inside and outside your cells.

**Does coffee or soda count?**

- No, water means water. Additionally, other drinks can be high in caffeine, sugar, or artificial sweeteners and may contribute to your headaches.

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## Food & Diet Related Triggers

Some people may have certain foods or diet patterns that can contribute to their headaches. Keep a food diary to help identify any potential food triggers.

**Eating patterns to help manage your headache:**

- Aim for a well-balanced diet with plenty of vegetables, protein, and other nutritious foods. For headache, it is especially important that you do not skip meals and follow a regular eating schedule, such that you are eating around the same time each day.

**Try to keep a headache diary**

- Keeping a diary to track your headaches and food or drink habits can help identify triggers. This can also be used to track your medication use, sleep, or menstruation cycles to identify other causes of your headaches. Try downloading Migraine Buddy on your phone!

**Common food and drink triggers**

- Common food and drink triggers include caffeine, artificial sweeteners, alcohol (especially wines containing sulfites), MSG, nitrate-containing foods (deli meat, hot dogs, bacon), and tyramine-containing foods (aged cheese, cured and processed meats, citrus fruits).

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## Aim for Regular Exercise

We know that when things get busy, exercise is often the first to fall off the to-do list. Other times, differences in ability may make this difficult to achieve. However, any amount of regular exercise can be helpful to your headache and to your overall health.

**How does exercise affect your headache?**

- Recent studies suggest that exercising triggers signals in your brain that help lessen the intensity of your headaches. People who exercise regularly generally have fewer problems with headaches. Even starting an exercise program has been shown to help reduce headaches.

**How much time should you spend exercising?**

- The World Health Organization and headache providers recommend either 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise per week or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise per week (or an equivalent combination of both). Although, any amount of regular exercise is helpful.

**How intense should your exercise be?**

- Moderate intensity exercise includes brisk walking, hiking, or riding a bike. Vigorous intensity exercise includes climbing stairs or running. Weightlifting has also shown immense positive benefits with headache management. If these don't feel attainable, try researching chair exercises.

# Headache Treatment Checklist

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## Aim for a Healthy Weight

This can be achieved by regular exercise and eating a balanced diet.

**How can your weight affect your headaches?**

- Recent studies suggest that exercising triggers signals in your brain that help lessen the intensity of your headaches. People who exercise regularly generally have fewer problems with headaches. Even starting an exercise program has been shown to help reduce headaches.

**What to do if you are over or underweight:**

- If you are under or overweight, you should talk with your primary care doctor about your eating habits, level of activity, and any other health-related factors that may be contributing to your weight.

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## Aim for Healthy Sleep Habits

We understand that a good night's sleep can be difficult to attain. However, poor sleep habits have a strong association with headaches.

**How does poor sleep affect your headache?**

- Sleep is a very important part of health. Lack of sleep and excessive sleep are frequent contributors to headaches. The goal should be about 7 hours of sleep per night.

**Tips for a good night’s sleep:**

- Individuals with headaches are encouraged to create a healthy bedtime routine that includes minimizing screen use within one hour of going to bed. We also encourage going to bed and waking up on a consistent schedule.

**Sleep apnea & insomnia:**

- Sleep apnea is a problem breathing while sleeping, which keeps people from getting restorative sleep. Many people with sleep apnea stay asleep during the night. Insomnia is trouble falling asleep or staying asleep. Sleep apnea and Insomnia can contribute to headaches.

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## Take Care of Your Mental Health

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being and affects how we think, act, and feel. Poor mental health can be a contributor to your headaches.

**Do I have anxiety? Am I depressed?**

- Mental health conditions are real, common, and treatable. Anxiety and depression can look and feel differently than how it is portrayed to us in the media, so it is important that we check in with ourselves. Consider taking a mental health quiz at mhanational.org to see where your mental health is.

**How does your mental health affect your headache?**

- Stressors can cause chemical changes in your body that lead to mental health symptoms and headaches. These symptoms can affect your emotional wellbeing, increasing risk of headaches. Studies have shown that when these symptoms are treated with therapies, headaches improve.

**What to do if you are struggling with mental health:**

- Self-care is an important part of enhancing your quality of life and managing life's stressors. We recognize it can be hard to admit when you need help. We recommend asking your primary doctor for help or looking for a therapist in your area at PsychologyToday.com.

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## Avoid Opioids for Headache Management

Opioid medications are not recommended for long-term treatment of headaches. These medications can be easily overused and cause rebound headaches or addiction.

**Why you should not use opioids to treat your headaches:**

- There is very limited evidence that opioids can help patients compared to other self-care therapies, over the counter, and prescription medications. Further, frequent use of opioids for headache relief can cause rebound headache from medication overuse.

**Names of common opioids:**

- Hydrocodone (Vicodin®,Norco®), Oxycodone (OxyContin® Percocet®), Oxymorphone (Opana®), Morphine (Kadian®, Avinza®), Codeine, Fentanyl.