

Post-Traumatic Headache

What is Post-Traumatic Headache?

Headache is the most common symptom after a concussion. It is also called post-traumatic headache. Post-traumatic headache can affect your ability to go to school, work, do your daily activities, and interact with others.

Post-traumatic headaches can feel different for each patient. Some headaches feel like a migraine, others feel like a tension-type headache. In most people, headaches stop after a few days or weeks. Sometimes they can last for months or longer.

How is Post-Traumatic Headache Diagnosed?

Make sure to tell your primary health provider if you are having headaches after your injury.

Your primary healthcare provider may ask several questions to better understand the type of headaches you have:

- How often do you get headaches?
- How long do they last?
- Where do you feel the pain?
- How strong is the pain?
- What type of pain you feel (e.g., pressure, throbbing, stabbing)?
- Do you have other symptoms (e.g., nausea, vomiting)?
- Does anything trigger your headaches (e.g., time of day, activity)?
- Is there anything that helps relieve the pain?
- Have you had previous headache treatments?
- Do your headaches affect your ability to function?

Patient Tips

It is a good idea to keep a headache diary or calendar to record things like your headache symptoms, the time that you took any medication, and any activities that you feel may start and/or stop a headache. Take this diary with you to medical appointments.

This can help you give your healthcare provider as much information as possible about your headaches.

Tell your primary health care provider if if your symptoms are not improving after 1-2 weeks.

Your primary healthcare provider may do some exams on their own or they may refer you to a specialist to figure out what might be causing your headaches.

Some exams you might have are:

- A neurological exam to find out if there is injury to your brain or nerves
- A cervical spine (neck) exam and musculoskeletal exam to look for any injury to your jaw, neck, or other parts of your head
- A vestibular or vision exam to look for any damage to your inner ear or problems with your vision

How can I manage my headaches?

What can I do to help prevent headaches?

Sleep

Make sure to get regular sleep. See the Section on Sleep-Wake Problems if you have trouble falling or staying asleep.

Eat regular meals

Try not to skip meals and do eat at regular times. Try to have protein at every meal.

Drink water regularly

Drink 4 to 6 glasses of water every day. Try to avoid caffeine drinks such as coffee, tea, or soft-drinks. Also avoid diet drinks that contain the ingredient aspartame.

Avoid stress

Try relaxation activities to help you deal with stress, such as yoga, meditation and exercise.

Get regular exercise

If your primary healthcare provider says you can start to exercise start slowly and increase your effort gradually. Exercise might look different for everyone; you might go for walks, go swimming, or use exercise machines. If exercise triggers a headache, reduce your effort or try a different activity.

How can I deal with my headache without medication?

Here are some things you can do to help your headaches:

- Apply a cold or hot pack to your neck or head
- Tie something tight around your head (e.g. scarf)
- Stretch and self-massage your head, neck, and shoulders and/or see a registered massage therapist (RMT)
- Do breathing exercises
- Go to a quiet place
- Lie down
- Do visualization or other mindfulness-based exercises
- Use a calendar or headache diary to track your headaches.

What medications might be used for post-traumatic headache?

Your primary healthcare provider may prescribe medication called ‘analgesics’ to help your pain. Analgesics can help get rid of a headache, or at least stop it from getting worse. Always follow your primary healthcare provider’s instructions on how to take your medication.

If you use an analgesic for longer than or more than you are supposed to, it may trigger a ‘rebound headache’. The only way to treat a rebound headache is to stop taking the analgesic that caused it.

Additional resources

Below is a list of resources you may find helpful to learn more about post-traumatic headaches, as well as tools that may help you with your recovery process.

Post Concussion Symptoms Care (booklet)

<https://patienteduc.fraserhealth.ca/file/concussion-a-guide-to-understanding-symptoms-and-r-216241.pdf>

Becoming a Self-Manager: pain (website)

<https://concussion.vch.ca/pain-management>

Self-Regulated and Lifestyle Strategies (pdf)

https://concussionsontario.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/Table%206.2_Self-Regulated_Intervention_Dec%202024.pdf