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Many people deal with headaches from time to time and an increasing number of people complain of chronic headaches.

Headaches can significantly impair one's ability to function and participate in the activities of day to day life. More than 90 percent of individuals who have headaches have some variant of the two most common types of headaches – tension-type and migraine headaches. In this article we will discuss common triggers for these headaches and touch on strategies that can be used to identify and address these issues. Please note, new headaches that are increasing in severity, are associated with neurologic symptoms (e.g. numbness, weakness) or are highly concerning in any other way, one should seek prompt evaluation by a healthcare provider.

While the causes of headaches are not fully understood, it is clear that headaches, like many other health issues, can often be a sign of imbalance in our lives. To fully treat and "cure" headaches, people need to be willing to look at several areas of life that may be contributing to headaches such as the food we eat, sleep patterns, life stressors (internal and external) and our current use of medication. It is important to know that most medications used to treat headache pain (prescription and non-prescription) can actually lead to increased headaches over time if they are used too frequently. This phenomenon is called a "medication rebound headache." If someone suffer from frequent headaches and is taking medications more than a couple of times per week, these medications may be a potential cause for headaches. In this situation, one should consider decreasing use of the medication (if one is on prescription medication, please discuss decreasing dosage with a healthcare provider). An individual can also see his or her healthcare provider to discuss starting medication or supplements that might be more effective in preventing headaches before they occur.

One of the best ways to get insight into patterns that may be contributing to a headache is to keep a headache diary (see my website for an example). This is a place where a person can record information about his or her headaches (timing, duration, associated activities, what makes it better). Keeping a record like this for a period of time (usually several weeks) can help a person to begin to see patterns that may be contributing to headaches. For instance, do you often get headaches when you have slept poorly the night before, when you are worried about a loved one, when you eat at a certain restaurant? This information can be very helpful for you to use and make changes that eliminate possible headache triggers.

Certain foods and food additives commonly play a role in triggering headaches (especially migraines). These include caffeine found in sodas, coffee, energy drinks and chocolate, nitrites – a chemical preservative used in many processed foods like luncheon meats, salamis, hot dogs, etc., monosodium glutamate – a flavor enhancer that gives a salty taste to many processed foods and aspartame – the artificial sweetener used in many sugar-free beverages and snack foods. It can be helpful to start paying attention and seeing where one can eliminate these foods in his or her diet. Eliminating these processed foods may reduce headaches and can be a boost to overall health in general. To help with this process there are special diets (called headache elimination diets) that you can try where you eliminate many of these common headache-triggering foods (see my website for an example). Changing one's diet so dramatically can be a big undertaking. However, the results can often be dramatic and are often seen in days.

No discussion would be complete without stress. Stress can impact every aspect of our health and functioning. Headaches are no exception. It is essential that we find ways to relieve stress. Massages and regular exercise are helpful. But, you can start most simply by doing daily relaxation breathing exercises. These can begin to break the cycle of muscle tension and excitatory brain signals that are felt to contribute to chronic headaches.

Now you have lots of great tools at your disposal to start figuring out the potential causes of your headaches and start getting relief today (headache diaries, diet changes, stress management techniques). Using these tools does not cost anything and can often result in dramatic improvements of tension and migraine headaches. So start being your own headache detective and find out what are your triggers and what strategies work for you. You have the power to improve your health and your functioning starting today!

Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. For more information, to leave suggestions for future articles and additional resources visit www.functionwellmedicine.com .

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