



Moore Health Physiotherapy Explains: Neck-Related Headaches

Headaches are a very common form of pain. At any given time, around 15% of Australians will be taking painkillers for a headache. Headache can be defined as pain in the head that is located above the eyes or the ears, behind the head (occipital), or in the back of the upper neck. Headaches are classified as being either a:

- 1) **Primary Headache** — Headaches that are not associated or caused by disease.
- 2) **Secondary Headache** — Caused by other conditions which may be minor (e.g. withdrawal from caffeine) or serious and life-threatening (e.g. meningitis).

Virtually anything that stimulates the pain receptors in the head and neck can cause a headache, thus there are many *different types* of Primary Headaches — including tension headache, cluster headaches and migraine. One very common form of Primary Headache is caused by neck-related conditions and is called *cervicogenic headache* or, more commonly, **Neck-Related Headache**.

Headache and the Musculoskeletal System

To achieve movement, our muscles and bones (musculoskeletal system) need to work together harmoniously. The joints, discs, muscles, and ligaments of the neck all contain nerve endings which are sensitive to neck injury or strain. If these nerve endings become irritated or inflamed, they can not only cause pain in the neck region but can also refer pain into the face and scalp, causing a neck-related headache. The pain caused by a neck-related headache will frequently be worse at the base of the skull, with the pain radiating up to the forehead, temples, eyes, scalp and/or face. Thus, treatment of the neck can give rapid and lasting relief to sufferers of neck-related headaches.

Sometimes people with other kinds of headache (such as tension or migraine headaches) may also respond positively to treatment of the neck. For example, when we are under stress of any kind the muscles in our upper back, shoulders, neck and face may become very tense. This excessive muscle tension may lead to a tension headache which, in turn, is likely to respond very positively to treatment of the neck region.

Common Neck Conditions that Contribute to Neck-related Headache

- 1) **Poor Posture** — Correct neck posture requires that the head and neck are aligned in a way that minimises the forces on the structures of the neck such as the discs and joints. Poor posture will place strain on these structures and result in pain. Common neck-related headache postural problems include:
 - Slouching whilst sitting down
 - Maintaining poor neck posture when moving the neck and/or holding the neck in one position for too long
 - Spending too long sitting down in one place (eg. work desk)
 - Sleeping on the stomach with the head always faced to one side
- 2) **Injury to the Neck/ Nerve Irritation** — Sporting accidents and everyday incidents can cause trauma or irritation to the structures of the neck, resulting in neck-related headache.
- 3) **Whiplash** — A more severe form of neck injury. Whiplash occurs when the head is vigorously moved backward or forward, straining (or tearing) the muscles and ligaments of the neck. In very severe cases, the vertebrae of the neck can be dislocated or fractured.

- 4) **Jaw Clenching** — Prolonged and intense jaw clenching can lead to headache. For some people this intense jaw clenching will occur for prolonged periods whilst they are sleeping and they will then wake up with a headache.
- 5) **Wear and Tear/Arthritis** — General aging can lead to a progressive degeneration of the neck vertebrae. Headaches which may be felt as a pain in the neck, can be caused by arthritis particularly in the event that the first, second, or third vertebrae are involved.

Treating Neck Related Headaches

Headaches that are caused by problems of the musculoskeletal system tend to ease once the underlying disorder is identified and addressed. The key components of treating neck-related headaches are likely to be twofold: identifying postures or activities that precipitate neck-related headaches; and undertaking exercises specifically to condition muscles to hold the head and neck in proper position.

Moore Health