

# All in the head

**YOU HAVE A HEADACHE. YOUR HOME REMEDIES DID NOT HELP. YOU DECIDE TO SEE A DOCTOR. WHAT SHOULD YOU TELL HIM?**

There are various ways you can help a doctor decide how to treat you. First, try to describe the pain. Does it feel like a hard continuous pressure inside the head, or is it throbbing? Is the pain mild,

moderate or severe?

Pinpoint exactly where it hurts. All over the head is usually a tension headache, while a sharp pain behind an eye could be a cluster headache.

Tell him if you feel nauseous or if you are seeing stars: These are signs of a migraine.

Tell him when the headache began, whether it comes and goes or is continuous. If episodic, tell him how often it strikes and for how long.

Knowing what kind of headache it is will help him prescribe medication. Headaches have different causes and need different medicines.

Panadol and synflex work well for

tension headaches but will not relieve migraines. Similarly, triptans, which work for migraines, won't ease your tension headache.

Finally, tell him what sort of pills you are taking. If you've been taking too many painkillers you might be having a "rebound" headache.

In some cases, a doctor may ask to do a neuroimaging test just to rule out other, more serious, possibilities, like a tumour, aneurysm or blood clots in the brain.

This is a simple, but fairly pricey test. Usually he will order a CT scan, costing \$500-\$600, but if the doctor suspects certain tumours, he may want an MRI scan, which gives greater detail and costs \$800-\$900.

In general, patients who should have neuroimaging are those who have recently begun to suffer headaches whose features are different from the standard headache types like migraine, tension headache or cluster headache.

Neuroimaging may also be ordered for:

- ◆ Patients who start getting headaches in later life
- ◆ Patients with a sudden (within a minute) and excruciating "thunderclap headache", where part or the whole head throbs painfully for about 20-30 minutes
- ◆ Patients, who are not over-using pain killers, whose headaches have changed recently to a daily pattern
- ◆ Patients with conditions such as fever, weight loss, cancer or HIV.

The majority of headaches are benign. Should your headache turn out to be caused by a tumour, it is not an automatic death sentence. There are many different types of brain tumours and some are curable. Generally, the earlier you find out, the better the outcome.

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