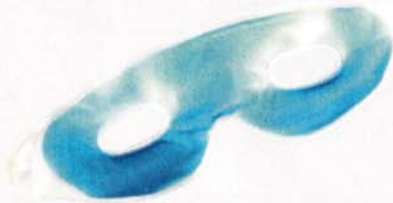


First Response

The headache came on fast and strong. What can you do? Try these suggestions.

- Drink something caffeinated. "Caffeine is a double-edged sword," says Dr. Marie Slegr, a community neurologist in Toronto. "Some people can interrupt a migraine by taking their pain medication with a coffee or cola." However, overconsumption can aggravate migraines, and caffeine-withdrawal headaches are a trigger.
- Both heat and cold can help – for different reasons. Apply an ice pack to reduce inflammation, says Dr. Annette Bourdon, a chiropractor in Montreal. ~~A cool cloth on your temples or neck can also reduce the intensity of the pain, says registered massage therapist Brad Dow, but use heat to relieve tired, achy muscles.~~
- Take a nap in a cool, dark room, suggest Dr. Lawrence Robbins and Susan Lang, authors of *Headache Help* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000).
- Practise relaxation exercises, such as deep breathing and imagery techniques, to lower blood pressure, reduce muscle tension and increase blood flow, add Dr. Robbins and Lang.



A headache is caused by a headache trigger (which can be anything from overmedication to anxiety) irritating the nerves, muscles and/or blood vessels surrounding the face, neck and/or head. Whether the irritated cells are in the head or elsewhere, they create a pattern of nerve signals that make you experience the pain in your head. Tension headaches, for example, are caused by tightening muscles in the shoulders, neck, scalp or jaw; migraines – three times more common in women than men – are thought to be linked to the widening and tightening of blood vessels in the brain; and cluster headaches are also caused by dilated blood vessels, as well as a drop in blood oxygen levels. Triggers for migraines can include hormonal changes, specific foods and smells, stress and lack of sleep.

For most of us, a mild headache means reaching for the acetaminophen or ibuprofen for quick relief. For migraines, your doctor may prescribe something stronger that specifically gets at whatever is driving the migraine. For example, a class of medication called triptans stimulates the neurotransmitter serotonin to constrict blood vessels. While patients usually respond well to triptans, the medications are quite expensive (about \$100 for six tablets) and have a side-effect profile that will keep them listed as prescription drugs. Other medications aim to ward off the headaches in the first place – crucial given that migraine attacks may deprive the brain of oxygen, acting like ministrokes, which cause brain damage.

But is there another way? Many alternative therapies are having just as much success as conventional medicine, often by pinpointing individual headache triggers, from the foods you eat to the way you sit at your computer. No wonder more and more women are turning to massage, vitamin therapy and other complementary treatments for relief. Here are some of the options.

Acupuncture

Practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine believe that we are at our healthiest when chi (vital energy) flows freely and harmoniously through a network of meridians – invisible pathways – in our bodies. We experience disease, and such conditions as headaches, when chi's path is blocked or slowed, explains Dr. Dennis Lee, dean of students at the Alberta College of Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine in Calgary.

Acupuncture stimulates specific points on the meridians to restore chi flow and balance. It also