

One of the common reasons patients have their eyes tested is because they are experiencing headaches. A popular belief is that eyestrain causes headaches. While that may be true, there are many other causes of headaches, as well as different types of headaches.

There are two broad classifications of headaches:

**Primary:** the headache is not a result of an existing medical condition or trauma.

**Secondary:** the headache may be a result of an infection, head injury, tumor or any other medical condition. Secondary headaches need to be recognized, diagnosed and treated if necessary. Obvious conditions of infection, injury, fever or sinus congestion are items that should be dealt with together with providing symptomatic relief from the headache. Less obvious causes of headaches, such as tumors or dental conditions might require more specific diagnostic tests than a routine evaluation. Some intracranial neoplasms have ocular manifestations, so having a comprehensive visual examination may be a part of this process.

The majority of patients we see have headaches of the primary category. There are different categories of headaches in this class.

**Tension Headaches:** This is the most common cause of headaches. The stress and tension of everyday life can cause muscular tension in and around the neck, which brings about a dull, steady pain on both sides of the head. The use of over-the-counter analgesics such as acetaminophen “Tylenol”, ibuprofen (Motrin) or aspirin, help to alleviate the general discomfort of this type of headache. Relaxation exercises and stress management have shown some success to control and lessen this type of headache.

**Cluster Headaches:** These headaches come on with no warning or obvious reason. The cause of these headaches is not fully understood. They occur repeatedly over a period of weeks or months. They typically occur on one side of the head, sometimes around the eye or temple. There appears to be some evidence that blood flow substances, such as alcohol, smoking, histamine or nitroglycerine play a part in triggering this type of headache.

**Migraine Headaches:** This form of headache is complex and important to our office because sometimes it produces a visual problem. Migraine headaches can have three components: visual aura, headache and nausea. The classic migraine “sick headache” will have all three parts in their episode, in different severities. Some people will only have two, or even only one component.

This type of headache can produce sudden and striking visual symptoms. Many of our patients call our office to report that they are experiencing visual disturbances. These may include severe light sensitivity, flashes of light, scintillating flickering lights, wavy patterns in their field of vision, or patchy areas of visual field loss. Typically this aura lasts for no more than 30-40 minutes but it can be very disturbing when it comes on. After the visual display disappears, the patient can experience a headache, nausea, or nothing at all. Patients who have migraines can have any combination of components and in different levels of severity.

The cause of this malady is not completely understood. The current hypothesis involves the neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine, and how they alter the vascular system in the brain. Therapeutic drugs used to minimize the effects of migraines target the receptor sites for serotonin in the brain.

There are various things that can trigger a migraine attack. Here are a few:

- Emotional stress
- Intense physical exercise or activity
- Abrupt changes in weather
- Bright lights
- Odors
- Extreme changes in eating patterns
- Certain foods or drinks: wine, caffeine (withdrawal), nitrates (hot dogs), cheese, MSG to name a few.

If you are experiencing recent, unrelenting headaches you would be wise to contact your physician, as there may be an underlying cause for them. If you experience headaches with eyestrain, blurriness or double vision, you should contact us to see if your vision is contributing to your problems.