

Helpful information provided by the Department of Emergency Medicine

Tension Headache (Muscle Contraction Headache)

You have been diagnosed as having a tension headache. This is one of the most common causes of head pain. These headaches are usually felt as a pain over the top of your head and back of your neck. Stress, anxiety, and depression are common triggers for these headaches. Tension headaches are not life threatening and will not lead to other types of headaches. Tension headaches can often be diagnosed by a history from the patient and a physical exam. Sometimes, further lab and x-ray studies are used to confirm the *diagnosis* (learning what is wrong). Your caregiver can help you solve personal problems causing anxiety or stress. Antidepressants can be prescribed if depression is a problem.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- **If testing was done, call for your results.** Remember, it is **your responsibility** to get the results of all testing. *Do not assume everything is fine because you do not hear from your caregiver.*
- You may use acetaminophen (Tylenol®), ibuprofen (Advil® or Motrin®), or aspirin as needed for pain. **Do not use these if your caregiver has given medications which may interfere with this.**
- Biofeedback, massage, or other relaxation techniques may be helpful.
- Ice packs or heat to the head and neck can be used. Use these three to four times per day or as needed.
- Physical therapy may be a useful addition to treatment.
- If headaches continue, even with therapy, you may need to think about lifestyle changes.

SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION IF:

- You develop problems with medications prescribed.
- You do not respond or obtain no relief from medications.
- You have a change from the usual headache.
- You develop *nausea* (feeling sick to your stomach) or vomiting.
- You develop a stiff neck.
- An oral temperature above 101.0 develops.