

Tension headache

Acute and prophylactic therapy guidelines

- Exclude the following red flags prior to treating any headache:
 - Thunderclap headache (intense headache of explosive onset)
 - Jaw claudication
 - Progressive headache worsening over weeks
 - New onset headache in a patient over 50 years
 - Headache causing a person to wake from sleep
 - Rapid progression of personality changes confirmed by a witness
 - Headache in a person with history of HIV or immunosuppression
 - Unilateral red eye
 - Headache with a typical aura (duration over 1 hour or including significant motor weakness)
 - Headache associated with postural changes
 - Rapid progression of unexplained cognitive impairment
 - Rapid progression of sub-acute neurological deficit

Guideline Name	Tension headache: acute and prophylactic therapy guidelines
Date Issued:	July 2016
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Presentation

- Patients with tension headaches will usually have episodic pain.
- Tension headaches are termed chronic if they occur more than 15 days per month.
- May occur in combination with migraine and secondary headaches.
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General Advice and treatment

Step 1

- Simple analgesia such as Ibuprofen (avoid opioids) along with explanation and reassurance.
- Examine triggers and consider medication overuse headaches.

Step 2

- Consider alternative NSAID such as Naproxen 500mg bd as regular medication for a period if headaches are severe (remember PPI cover).

Step 3

- If headaches are severe, frequent and persistent, consider amitriptyline starting at 10mg at night and slowly increasing to 75-150mg.
- Consider TENS and cognitive therapies
- SSRI's are not useful unless there is underlying depression.

Step 4

- Consider acupuncture (this is currently not a commissioned service)

Beta blockers and Benzodiazepines are unhelpful in tension headaches and should be avoided.

Useful facts

- Stress is a common trigger which may not always be obvious.
- MRI scan should be considered as part of the diagnostic process. Any patients with an abnormal MRI scan should be referred.
- Usually occurs 1-2 times a year (often at the same time)