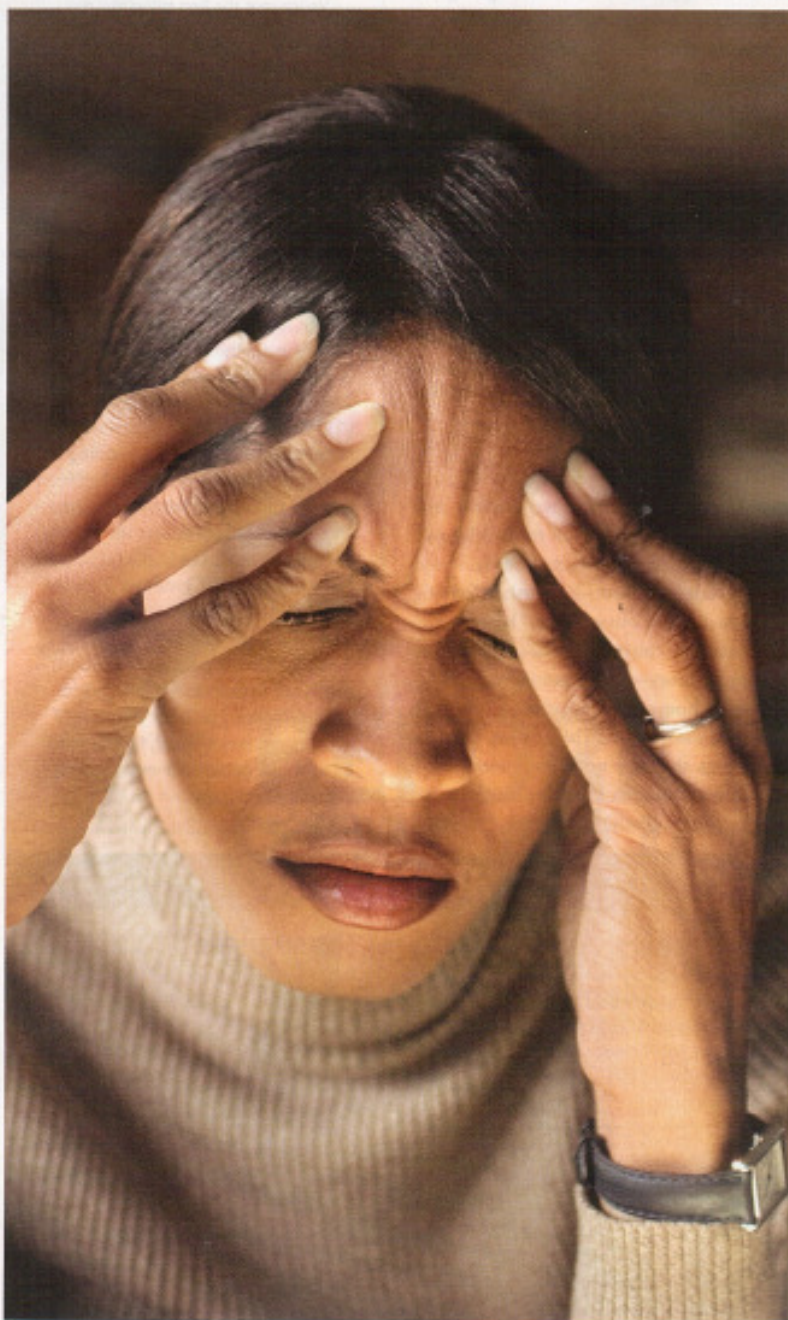


# POUNDING HEADACHES

Headaches are a sign that something is not right.  
**Lynne Gidish** explores this painful topic.



**M**pumbe Nkonde (36) started battling with headaches in her late 20s. She got them more and more often, until she found herself completely flattened by migraines every month. "The medicine I got from my pharmacy helped at first, but then nothing seemed to work.

"I went to see an ear, nose and throat specialist because I thought it could be sinusitis, but he couldn't find anything wrong," she says.

She went to a clinic to find the cause. "I had a whole lot of tests done and I was told I was getting migraines because of tension in my back, shoulders and jaw. I was sent for physiotherapy and given a small plastic plate to wear in the top of my mouth, called a posture modifying appliance (PMA)," Mpumbe remembers.

"I was amazed that it worked. I've been free of those terrible migraines ever since."

According to the American Headache Society, there are two main types of headaches: primary and secondary.

## PRIMARY HEADACHES

A primary headache, explains Dr Elliott Shevel, who heads up the Migraine Research Institute and The Headache Clinic in Johannesburg, is simply a headache with no other illnesses or conditions causing it. There are three major types:

**Tension headaches:** These are the most common headaches and are caused by muscle tension/contractions coming from your neck, shoulders, skull or forehead.

These muscles can tighten (contract) due to stress, poor posture, lack of sleep and eye strain. The contraction can cause pain, which can turn into a nasty headache that can last up to a week.

**Migraine headaches:** These are caused by stress, lack of sleep, bright lights, noise, and changes in the weather. Sometimes they are caused by hormones, and strong smells

and/or food. Genes can also play a role.

Migraines often occur on one side of your head. The pain comes from the arteries supplying your head and scalp, the muscles of your head, neck and jaw, and nerves that supply these areas.

Migraines usually last between four and 72 hours (without treatment) and sufferers usually get them on an average of about 13 times a year.

**Cluster headaches:** These can cause excruciating pain. This pain centres around the eye area, often on one side.

They usually affect men more often than women, and are headaches that keep coming back in groups or cycles. They appear suddenly and may occur with a watery eye and blocked nose, or a runny nose on the same side of your face.

## SECONDARY HEADACHES

According to Dr Shevel, secondary headaches are caused by other illnesses, traumas or brain disorders and can be just as painful as primary headaches. The difference is that a secondary headache is the symptom of another problem, not the main problem.

These are the ones that can be fatal, which is why headaches should never be ignored. Secondary headaches can be caused by nerve stimulation and irritation, and/or blood vessel dilation, pressure or constriction.

## THE BEST TREATMENT

If you do suffer from frequent headaches, it's important to find the cause. The best way to do this is to go to a clinic that specialises in headaches. A variety of specialists can examine you there.

Once the causes have been found, you'll know exactly which treatment will work best for you. These include:

**Medication:** The International Headache Society maintains that taking medication for your headache or migraines more than twice a week puts you at great risk of developing Medication Overuse Headache (MOH). This is a problem that occurs in headache sufferers who take painkillers regularly. But instead of getting better, the headaches become more frequent and more severe.

Because of this, sufferers tend to increase the dosage and take the drugs more often, and a vicious circle is set up, making the headaches worse and worse.

MOH does not only occur with over-the-counter medications. The worst cases of MOH occur with the most commonly prescribed migraine-specific drugs.

**Posture-modifying appliance (PMA):** A PMA reduces muscular tension. It is worn in the palate of your mouth and re-balances your jaw, temple and neck muscles. It also changes the posture of your head by pushing your jaw down. It is a safe and successful way of treating tension headaches.

**Oxygen therapy:** Recent studies have revealed that oxygen therapy can help in treating cluster headaches. Oxygen therapy – breathing in 100% oxygen – has been used for over 30 years for a whole range of medical conditions.

**Botox:** Botox injections have recently been approved in the US to prevent chronic headaches in adults – which is headaches for 15 days or more in a month.

## HOW TO HELP YOURSELF

Sister Khumziki Mlangeni, a registered nursing sister who deals with headache diagnosis, explains how you can treat headaches yourself.

**What to do:**

- Eat three balanced meals a day.
- Put an ice pack on your forehead to relieve tension headaches.
- Avoid bright, flashing lights. Televisions or computers can worsen headaches.
- Breathe deeply.
- Massage your neck and shoulders.
- Stretch for at least five minutes a day to loosen stiff muscles.
- Keep a headache diary. Note when your headache started, how long it lasted and what could have triggered it.
- Exercise regularly.
- Have your eyes checked. Eye problems can cause headaches.

**Don't:**


- Skip meals.
- Take too many painkillers.
- Lose out on sleep.
- Sleep on your stomach or in a position that causes muscle spasms in your neck.

## NATURAL WAYS TO AVOID HEADACHES

Dr Joel Schultz, a registered clinical homeopath, suggests the following ways to deal with headaches:

- Avoid caffeine. It's a stimulant that can trigger headaches or migraines.
- Avoid chocolate. It contains a chemical that might cause blood vessels to expand and contract, which can cause headaches.
- Limit fast foods. They contain the additive monosodium glutamate (MSG), which causes headaches in many people.
- Try sticking to fresh or frozen food instead of those that are dried or smoked, as these can trigger headaches.
- Watch out for dairy products especially cheese. They can be triggers for headaches and migraines.
- Too much red wine or alcohol can also trigger headaches. If you must drink, try vodka (one tot only!) as this seems to be the most headache-friendly.
- Aspartame is found in many diet drinks. It affects nerve cells and could also stimulate headaches.
- Drink lots of water – the first symptom of dehydration is a headache.

## WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR

- If you have headaches more than three times a week.
- If headaches affect your lifestyle.
- If you take painkillers every day or more than is recommended.
- If you have a headache accompanied by a stiff neck and a high temperature.
- If you're short of breath, dizzy, drowsy or confused.
- If you have vision problems, trouble speaking or memory loss. 

## USEFUL CONTACTS

The Headache Clinic:  
[www.headacheclinic.co.za](http://www.headacheclinic.co.za)  
National Headache Helpline:  
0861 678 911