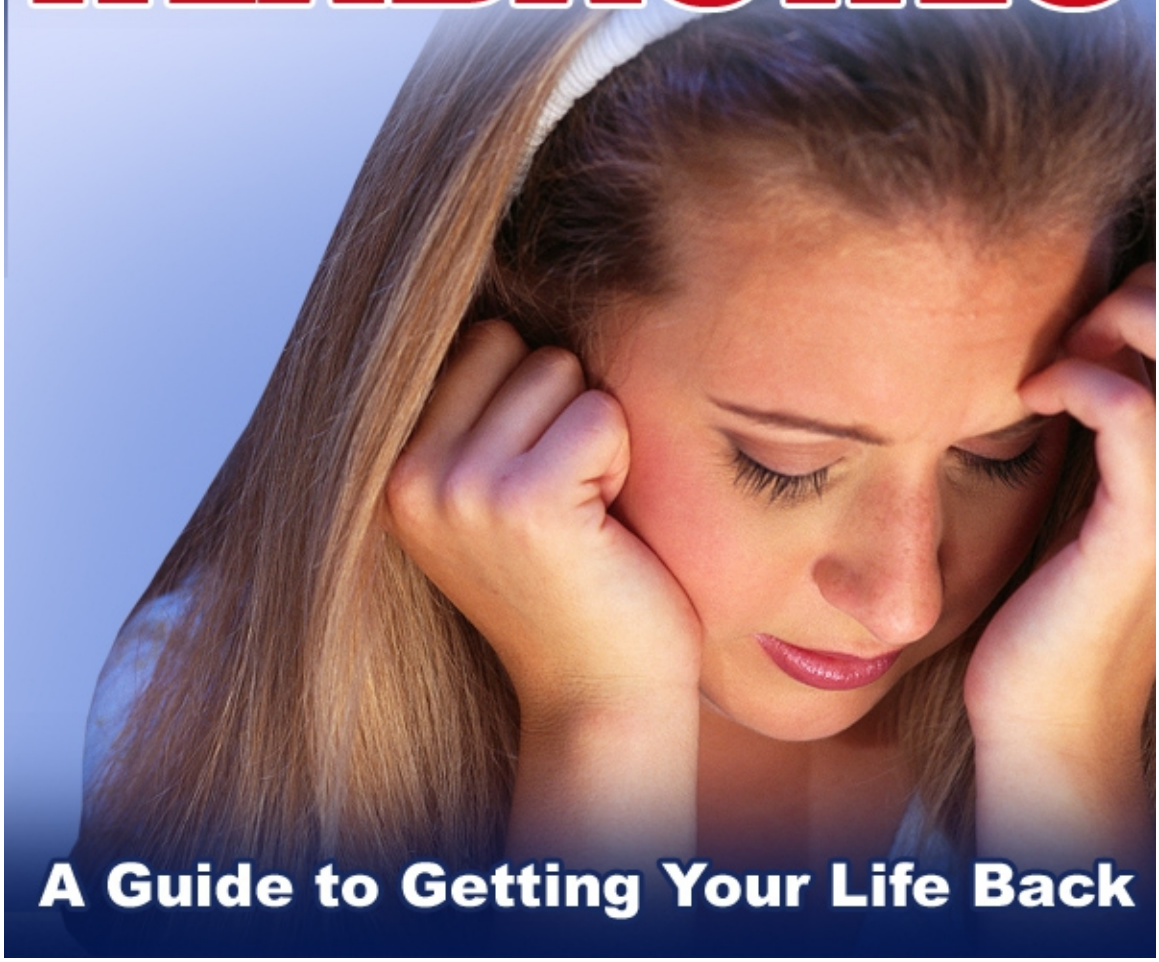
THE PREVENTION AND TREATMENT OF HEADACHES



A Guide to Getting Your Life Back

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Introduction - What is a Headache?

Everyone knows what a headache *feels* like. The pain can take many forms. For example, your head being trapped in vise; an angry blacksmith hammering on the inside of your skull; or maybe you just feel like your head is about to explode from the pressure building inside of it. You hold your head, search for a dark room, and wonder: *why* does my head hurt like this?

Although it often feels like your brain is swelling or your skull is pounding, the brain and the skull are actually incapable of feeling pain. So, what part of your head is it that's hurting? There are three different possible culprits for the source of headache pain: the delicate tracery of nerves that covers your scalp; nerves in the face, mouth and throat; and the muscles and blood vessels that cradle and nourish the brain. Once nerve endings in any of these areas are triggered, they send out a pain signal to the brain, and you end up with a headache.

Have you ever wondered what causes a headache? Is it possible to avoid them, or at least reduce their frequency? There are actually several different types of headaches, and each type has its own list of possible causes and treatments. In this book, we will look at the different kinds of headaches and at specialized treatment options available to help make the pain go away. Finally, we will also look at simple lifestyle changes that can keep headaches from starting in the first place.

Nobody deserves to be in pain all the time. Headaches may be among the most common of human afflictions, but they can also be one of the most crippling. For example, the World Health Organization ranked migraines as the 19th most common cause of disability. People who have frequent, severe headaches often find their pain interferes with both work and play.

Even if you just suffer from headaches occasionally, this book will teach you different ways of getting relief when you need it most. However, if you have a problem with frequent headaches, the information in these pages could help you get your life back again!

Chapter 1

Types of Headaches

The modern medical establishment recognizes a variety of different types of headache pain. However, before we look at the different kinds of headache, there are two main categories of headache pain that you should be aware of.

! **Primary Headaches** - These are the headaches most of us experience on a day-to-day basis. They are called primary headaches because the pain is not a symptom of another physical disorder. Ironically, they are often called "benign" headaches, although headache sufferers would classify them as anything but benign.

! **Secondary Headaches** - This category of headache includes any headache that is the symptom of another physical disease or disorder. Secondary headaches can be caused by such frightening diseases as aneurysms, blood clots, infections, tumors or a high fever, as well as others.

In this book, we will only be discussing primary headaches. Secondary headaches require the immediate attention of a doctor in order to treat the condition that is causing the headache. Some of the disorders above can be life-threatening if left unattended. So, please see a doctor if you experience anything similar to the following: headaches accompanied by neurological changes such as weakness, inability to talk, or loss of consciousness; headache pain that becomes progressively worse and is the worst headache you've ever experienced; pain that strikes like lightning and is extremely severe; or if you are having to resort to medication on a daily basis.

Primary Headaches

There are 3 main types of primary headaches: tension headaches, migraines, and cluster headaches. Each type has its own specific symptoms and possible causes.

Tension Headaches

The most common type of headache is tension headaches. Approximately 90% of headaches fall into this category. People with this type of headache typically feel like they have a rubber band wrapped too tightly around their head. The level of pain can vary from mild to fairly severe - in the worst form, pain spreads from the head and covers the shoulders, neck and upper back. Other unpleasant symptoms may also be present. For example, your scalp, neck and shoulder may be sore and painful to touch. You may also feel extremely tired and easily irritated, and may have to struggle to concentrate. Trouble sleeping and a diminished appetite are also common symptoms.

Depending on how often you experience them, tension headaches can be broken down into 3 different classifications. Episodic headaches are usually sporadic and occur less than once a month. Frequent tension headaches happen 1-5 times in a given month. The most frequent type of tension headache is classified as chronic. These can occur 15 or more days per month, which means that sufferers of this type of headache are in pain for at least *half* of their waking hours.

Causes

What causes a tension headache? As far as the biomechanical mechanisms that make you feel pain are concerned, there are two schools of thought. The first school of thought states that tension headaches are primarily caused by…tension. This theory holds that such factors as stress and anxiety cause muscles in your face, neck and scalp to tense up, causing your headache. However, some researchers today believe that tension headaches don't come from muscle tension at all, but rather from imbalances in brain chemicals and neurotransmitters.

For example, researchers are now able to use special machine called an electromyogram to measure muscle contractions, and they have not found a pattern of increased muscle tension that is specific to tension headaches. People with tension headaches are found to be tense, but not any more or less tense than people with migraines. Additionally, they show alterations in the levels of two very important types of brain chemical: serotonins and endorphins.

Serotonin helps the brain control mood, sleep and appetite, and serotonin imbalances can also cause clinical depression. Endorphins are the body's natural painkillers. Changes in the levels of these chemicals interfere with the body's ability to control pain, and are found in people with both tension headaches and migraines.

No one is sure what causes these changes in brain chemicals. The only thing researchers are certain of right now is that there is a connection between altered levels of these neurotransmitters and various types of headache. However, muscle tension may still be a major contributing factor to tension headache.

Tension Headache Triggers

Whatever the precise mechanism is that produces the headache, tension headaches are known to have a variety of different "triggers." Exposure to any one of these triggers can lead to a headache, but different people are sensitive to different "triggers." Here is a list of possible triggers - as you read it, think about the headaches you experience and see if any of these triggers apply to you:

- **Stress, depression or anxiety** - Heightened emotions, whether they are caused by emotional disorders such as clinical depression or simply from stressful life situations, can trigger headaches in susceptible individuals.

- **Lack of sleep, fatigue or overexertion -** anything that causes extreme exhaustion can also make you more susceptible to a headache.

- **Hunger -** Skipping meals or eating at irregular hours gives some people a nasty headache!

- **Bad posture -** Day-to-day poor posture or any activity that has you holding your head or neck in an awkward or uncomfortable position for a long time will contribute to a headache.

- **Eye strain -** Staring at a computer screen for too long or reading in poor light leads to headaches for some people.

- **Not getting enough exercise**

- **Excessive smoking, alcohol or caffeine use**

- **Arthritis and TMD -** Both arthritis of the neck and TMD, a disorder that causes excessive jaw clenching, can trigger tension headaches.

- **Colds, sinus infections, and nasal congestion -** Anyone who's ever had a bad cold can attest to this trigger.

- **Overuse of over-the-counter pain relievers** can cause a "rebound headache."

Migraines

The second type of headache we will discuss is the dreaded migraine. Up to 17% of women and 6% percent of men are believed to have experienced a migraine, and all of you that have had that misfortune know firsthand exactly how disabling migraines can be. A migraine is more than simply a headache. To start with, the pain is usually extremely intense - it can appear either on both sides of the head or be confined to just one side, but it almost always makes your head pulse and throb in agony. The pain often seems to reach a crescendo due to exposure to light or sound, which can effectively make participating in normal daily activities *impossible.* Additionally, migraine pain usually intensifies in response to physical exertion, often including getting up out of bed.

Another unusual symptom that distinguishes a migraine from other types of headaches is called *aura.* Aura symptoms can include changes in vision and perception, including a haze around

lights, seeing flashes or "stars" in your field of vision, blind spots, and a tingling sensation in arms and legs, almost as if one side of your body has gone to sleep. These strange symptoms usually precede an impending migraine attack, giving you approximately a half hour to go find a dark room to hide in. However, not all migraine sufferers experience aura.

Even if you don't experience aura symptoms, some migraine sufferers will notice changes in mood and energy levels up to a day or so before the migraine strikes. These are known as premonition symptoms, and can include feeling irrationally grumpy, sad or fatigued. However, some people's premonition symptoms are the exact opposite - they report feeling extremely happy and energetic. Other premonition symptoms include being constantly thirsty or craving sweets.

Migraine Causes

As is the case with many common medical problems, doctors and scientists are not completely certain about what causes a migraine. Here is a list of what we know so far about the mechanism that produces migraines:

- Migraines are a type of *vascular* headache, which means that they are thought to be the result of an abnormality in the system of veins and arteries that provides blood to the brain. Basically, these blood vessels widen more than they should, causing pain.

- Migraine victims also suffer from an imbalance of certain brain chemicals, similar to tension headache sufferers.

- People who have recurrent migraines experience a thickening of a region of the brain called the somatosensory cortex, which helps the brain process sensations. However, researchers are not sure yet if this thickening is a potential cause of migraine or an aftereffect.

- The tendency to develop migraines is probably genetic. For example, some studies have found that a child with just one migraine-suffering parent has a 50% chance of also suffering migraine attacks.

Taking all of the knowledge we now have into account, scientists have developed the following theory to explain what causes a migraine. According to this hypothesis, migraine sufferers have a nervous system that overreacts to certain stimuli, called triggers. When someone who is genetically predisposed to experience migraines is exposed to one of their migraine triggers, the unlucky person's nervous system sends out a signal which causes the arteries that supply the brain to spasm.

This spasm causes crucial blood vessels to narrow, which means the brain does not get as much blood as it should. Due to the narrow arteries, platelets in the blood begin to stick together. The action of the platelets causes the brain to release stores of serotonin, which narrows the arteries even more.

By this time, the brain has become increasingly deprived of oxygen, which may explain the aura symptoms described above. In order to re-supply it with fresh, oxygen-rich blood, some arteries inside the brain expand to allow more blood to flow through. Other blood vessels begin to expand as well, until finally the arteries in the scalp and the neck widen also.

Unfortunately, these blood vessels end up over-expanding and become too wide instead of too narrow. This causes the release of chemicals in your body that are associated with pain, inflammation and swelling. The body's response to the release of these chemicals combined with the over-expanded blood vessels in your head is what creates the excruciating pain of a migraine.

Migraines are an extremely crippling form of headache, often making normal life impossible. In fact, the World Health Organization data from 2004 showed that Migraines are one of the top twenty causes of disability. The frequency of headaches can vary from just once a year to almost daily. Once a headache starts, the attack can last anywhere from 4 hours to 6 days before it subsides.

Migraine Triggers

Like the triggers for tension headaches, triggers for migraines can vary from person to person, and some people are sensitive to some triggers and not others. Here is a list of possible triggers for migraines:

- **Stress, anxiety and depression -** Although migraines are by no means a psychosomatic illness, heightened emotional states and stress can be a trigger for some migraine-prone individuals.

- **Foods containing tyramine** - Tyramine is a substance that causes blood vessels to narrow, possibly setting off the chain reaction described above. Foods that contain tyramine include chocolate, aged cheese, yogurt, nuts, red wine, and processed meats such as summer sausage, bologna and lunch meats.

- **Foods containing MSG -** Foods such as Chinese food and many processed foods are high in this chemical, and may trigger migraines in some people.

- **Lack of sleep or too much sleep -** Any change in your normal sleep routine may trigger a migraine.

- **Caffeine -** Caffeine can trigger migraines in people who are sensitive to it.

- **Skipping meals**

- **Changes in the weather -** For some people, something as simple and natural as the changing of the seasons or a storm moving through may set off a migraine.

- **Hormonal changes -** In women, any event that causes hormone levels to fluctuate can also trigger a migraine. This includes menstruation, menopause, pregnancy, and possibly taking birth control pills.

- **Sensory Overload -** Bright lights or strong smells are also possible migraine triggers.

- **Overexertion -** This can include too much exercise, and for some extremely unfortunate individuals, too much sex.

Migraine triggers vary from person to person, so the list above describes the most common triggers. However, it is far from exhaustive. If you suffer from migraines and nothing on this list rings a bell, don't worry. We will look at ways to find out what triggers your headaches in the chapter on prevention.

Cluster Headaches

A cluster headache is one of the most excruciating kinds of headache, surpassing even the pain of an average migraine in intensity. It is generally described as a sharp, stabbing type of pain that lacks the throbbing, pulsating quality of a migraine. Cluster headache attacks happen extremely fast - one minute the person feels perfectly normal, the next minute like they are being stabbed through the eye. Generally, the pain is located on just one side of the head.

Cluster headaches often occur in tandem with other symptoms, which are usually limited to the side of the face that the pain is on. For example, the victim's pupils may shrink in size, one eye may suddenly start overflowing with tears or the eyelid may start drooping, and the affected side of the face may swell or turn red.

The defining feature of a cluster headache is that the attacks are experienced in waves or cycles, also called clusters. Clusters can last from 2 days to a couple of weeks. During the cluster period, attacks usually occur at least once per day, although they can occur more often. Many times, cluster attack victims are jerked out of a sound sleep by a severe headache. The length of each individual headache is relatively short, however; anywhere from a half hour to an hour and a half.

After the cluster period ends, the victim may experience a pain-free period of remission, when the headaches do not occur. People who experience cluster periods followed by remission have what is known as *episodic* cluster headache. Other people have *chronic* cluster headache, with no remission period between cycles.

Causes of Cluster Headache

Cluster headaches are even more shrouded in mystery than tension headaches and migraines. Nobody is quite sure what causes these painful attacks, and the scientific hypotheses we have so far are not very detailed. For example, some researchers believe that cluster headaches are caused by a disruption in the nerve system that carries sensations from your head to your brain. This system of nerves is called the trigeminal system.

Other doctors believe that the pain starts with blood vessels buried deep in your head, such as the arteries that run through your sinuses. The hypothalamus, the control center for the body's circadian rhythms or "biological clock," is probably involved as well. That would explain why cluster attacks occur in such a regular pattern.

Triggers of Cluster Headache

Unlike migraines and tension headaches, cluster headaches lack a set of easily definable triggers. However, there are a few events that seem to bring on attacks:

- **Changing seasons -** for some people, cluster headaches are associated with a particular season of the year. These people may suffer a cluster attack during the same time each year. For example, every winter or every fall. Other people are particularly prone to cluster attacks after the solstices, the longest and shortest days of the year.

- **Alcohol -** Alcohol is not known to start off a cluster of attacks. But, once the cluster starts, even a small amount of alcohol can bring on a headache.

Cluster headaches affect 1 in every 1,000 people. They are the rarest type of primary headache, and affect men more frequently than women. However, for cluster headache sufferers, the pain is a serious and debilitating affliction. Some people have even been known to attempt suicide during an attack due to the severity of the pain.

Does Stress Cause Headaches?

Many people believe that headaches are a by-product of stress. Can stress really cause headaches? In a word, yes - at least for some people. Being under severe stress does not result in a headache every time for every person. However, for people that have a predisposition to get headaches, it can definitely act as trigger for both tension headaches and migraines.

Although some doctors now feel that an imbalance in brain chemicals is the root cause of many headaches, the question remains: What is it that causes the headache victim's brain chemistry to go out of whack in the first place? In the case of migraines, we know there is a genetic predisposition for a migraine sufferer's brain to react to stress in a certain way, but what about tension headaches? People who suffer from tension headaches frequently feel a headache coming on during stressful situations at work, or in anticipation of conflict with friends and family. This seems to indicate that stress can definitely bring on a tension headache, at least in certain individuals.

Of course, just because stress may cause some headaches does not mean that headaches are a psychological disorder, or that the pain is "all in your head." All headaches, even headaches triggered by stress, are real, measurable physical ailments. Still, learning to deal effectively with stress can be a powerful tool in managing headaches for those people that list stress as a headache trigger.

Chapter 2

Treatment of Headaches

Many different treatment options are available for the different types of headaches. Medical treatments can include drugs and even surgery in severe cases. Many drugs have proven effective, but for some people they do not offer the desired relief. Also, many drugs have side effects. In this chapter, we will look at the different medical options available to treat headaches, and then at natural remedies you can try out at home. Natural therapies can be used either instead of drugs for people who are unwilling to use them, or in conjunction with traditional medical treatment.

Medical Treatments for Headaches

Analgesics - These are painkillers, either prescription or over-the-counter, which are prescribed to relieve headache pain. They are most effective for tension headaches and mild migraines.

- Over-the-counter analgesics can include acetaminophen (Tylenol), Ibuprofen, aspirin, and naproxen sodium (Aleve).

- Prescription analgesics include indomethacin, naproxen, and ketorolac tromethamine.

- Potential side effects can include digestive disturbances, ulcers, and in the case of acetaminophen, liver damage if the drug is used heavily for long periods of time.

- If you are using analgesics to treat chronic headache pain, you may actually be making the situation worse. Constant use of painkillers can cause what's known as a "rebound headache" - after the painkiller wears off, the headache comes back with a vengeance.

Triptans - Triptans are a class of drugs prescribed specifically for migraines and cluster headaches, although they can also be used by people affected by both chronic migraines and

chronic tension headaches. In addition to relieving headache pain, they can also help with nausea, vomiting, and other symptoms associated with migraines.

- Triptans work by causing the over-dilated blood vessels in your brain to shrink back to normal size, normalizing the flow of blood in the brain.

- They also prevent the release of brain chemicals that contribute to inflammation and pain.

- Triptans can stop a migraine once it starts. Statistically speaking, they successfully stop 80% of migraine attacks.

- These drugs come in 3 forms: oral, injectable and a nose spray. The injections and the nose spray are the fastest-acting.

- Potential side effects can include body aches, tiredness, dry mouth, tingling sensations, weakness and throwing up.

- Rare, but more serious side effects can include a stroke or a heart attack. So, do not pass go and go directly to the nearest emergency room if you feel chest pain or pressure, get dizzy or have trouble breathing after taking triptans.

- Some common triptan brand names include Imetrix, Maxalt, Amerge, Zomig, Axert, Frova, and Relpax.

Ergots - Ergots are derived from the fungus ergot, a black growth that attacks grain and in its pure form is hallucinogenic when ingested. Ergots are used like triptans, to stop a migraine headache once it starts. They are also sometimes used to treat cluster headaches.

- Ergots work by narrowing the blood vessels in the brain that dilate during a migraine attack, much like triptans.

- However, they last longer in the body and have more potential to affect the heart than triptans do.

- There are two ergot derivatives on the market today, ergotamine and dihydroergotamine. Dihydroergotamine boasts greater effectiveness and fewer side effects.

- Side effects of ergots include upset stomach and vomiting, drowsiness and fatigue, and the potential of rebound headaches if the drugs are used too often.

- More serious side effects like heart attack and stroke are also possible. In pregnant women, ergots should never be used as they can cause miscarriage.

Midrin - Midrin combines a blood vessel constrictor, an analgesic and a light sedative into one package. It is effective for both migraine and tension headaches.

- Midrin is taken orally.

- Possible side effects include dizziness, drowsiness, rash, and withdrawal symptoms when trying to stop using the drug.

Butalbital combinations -Butalbital is a sedative that is often combined with analgesics such as aspirin or acetametaphin, and sometimes caffeine or codeine. It is used for migraines and severe tension headaches.

- These combinations are used infrequently due to side effects.

- Side effects can include rebound headaches and withdrawal symptoms.

Oxygen Inhalation Treatment - Oxygen inhalation is used as a medical treatment for cluster headaches. Pure oxygen is inhaled through a mask for up to 10-15 minutes. This often leads to a rapid release from the grasp of a cluster headache - up to 80% of patients reported relief in trials.

As you can see, there are many different drug regimens that can be used to help treat your headaches. However, please remember that only a doctor can tell you if these medications are right for you or not.

Natural Remedies for Headaches

For people who just don't want to use drugs or can't handle the side effects, there are also natural remedies available. These have the advantage of being as effective as drug therapy in some cases, and they are often cheaper than drugs and have fewer side effects. Here is a look at some popular non-drug approaches to treating headaches.

Herbal Remedies

Long before Western medicine showed up on the scene, people used plants to treat themselves for various ailments. Many of these herbal remedies are surprisingly effective, having been shown to work over centuries of use. In many cases, their effectiveness is now being proven to the Western world in scientific studies. Some of the herbs commonly used to treat headaches include:

- **Feverfew** - This herb is a small relative of the sunflower that looks much like a miniature daisy. It has been used as an anti-inflammatory for centuries in traditional medicine. Feverfew has been shown in several studies to be effective in both prevention and treatment of migraines. To use feverfew to stop a migraine, take 100-300 mg of the herb. If you are allergic to yarrow, chamomile, or ragweed, please avoid feverfew because you may be allergic to it, also.

- **Willow Bark** - Willow bark has been used for centuries to treat pain and inflammation - it is the original source of aspirin, and is equally effective. However, willow bark appears to be less likely to upset your stomach than aspirin. Since aspirin can cause Reye's syndrome in children under 16, it is advised to also avoid giving willow bark to them.

- **Valerian, skullcap, and lemon balm -** Used separately or in combination, these herbs possess both sedative and anti-spasmodic properties. They can help relax you and help to de-constrict your arteries, restoring proper blood flow to your brain. These herbs are available in the form of capsules, tea and tinctures. Effective for tension headaches and possibly for migraines.

- **Cayenne -** A cayenne pepper solution can be used as a nose spray to help relieve a cluster headache. However, this treatment can cause pain and a burning sensation in the nose. Talk to a naturopath or doctor to find a suitable preparation.

- **Ginger -** Ginger may be effective in treating migraine headaches. There was a case study where a woman who suffered from chronic migraines began taking ginger at the first sign of aura and was able to head off her headache. Ginger has anti-inflammatory properties and is known to help fight off nausea. There currently have not been any standardized experiments done on ginger, but to see if it works for you, take 500 to 600 milligrams of powdered ginger in water.

- **Ginkgo Biloba -** Although this herb is better-known as a memory enhancer, it can also help stop migraine pain. Ginkgo widens blood vessels and helps improve circulation, keeping a normal amount of blood and oxygen flowing to the brain.

- **Coffee -** Coffee contains caffeine, which has been shown effective in treating headaches. However, be aware that many over-the-counter drugs for headaches, such as Excedrin, also contain caffeine.

Aromatherapy

People have always taken great pleasure in the scent of certain plants and herbs. However, aromatherapy is about more than perfume. Aromatherapy harnesses the power of essential plant oils and fragrances to enhance health and well-being.

Don't be fooled by "aromatherapy" products that contain synthetic fragrance oils instead of real essential oils. To get the benefits, you need to inhale the volatile compounds from the plant itself, compounds found only in real essential oils.

For aromatherapy, you can take a warm bath with essential oils in the bathwater, apply just a drop or two of skin-safe oil to your skin, or place a few drops in a bowl of hot water and inhale the steam. Most essential oils should not be applied to your skin at full strength. Instead, you should dilute to a 2% concentration using a carrier oil to avoid skin irritation.

Here are some essential oils commonly used in the treatment of headaches:

- **Peppermint** - Stimulates blood flow and has a pain-relieving effect that may be as strong as acetaminophen. Inhale vapors, or apply a drop to your temples.

- **Sandalwood** - Applied in a paste made with clay to the temples. This is a popular remedy from India.

- **Lavender** - Lavender is a sedative that also relieves pain. This oil can safely be used "neat," without diluting it in carrier oil.

- **Rosemary** - Stimulates blood flow and helps relieve pain. Can be combined with lavender oil and rubbed directly on stiff neck muscles to relax them.

- **Rose oil** - Rose oil massaged onto your face will help lift a headache.

▪**Frankincense** - Frankincense oil can be applied full-strength at the base of the skull.

Biofeedback

The mind-body connection is a potent force that is still little-understood. However, doctors and scientists are learning more and more about this connection, and biofeedback is one result of our increased knowledge. With biofeedback, the patient is taught how to control bodily functions that until recently were thought to be involuntary. For example, heart rate, body temperature, brain activity and muscle tension.

How does biofeedback work? Basically, you are hooked up to a machine that uses sensors to measure the bodily functions you are trying to learn to control. For example, your therapist might hook you up to an electromyogram, which is a machine that measures muscle tension.

The machine lets you know when the tension level in your muscles changes - for example, it may make noise or light up. By learning to sense when your muscles are starting to tense up, you can also learn to control that tension and relax them.

In addition to biofeedback for muscle tension, biofeedback to control body temperature is commonly used for migraines. People that learn how to raise their body temperature report that they are able to control their migraines.

The link between body temperature and pain relief for migraines is that in order for your body temperature to rise, your blood vessels have to get wider. Thus, if you can learn to raise your body temperature, you can learn to control the flow of blood into your brain and cut off the chain reaction that results in a migraine headache.

Acupuncture and Acupressure

Acupuncture is an ancient Chinese science that has been in use for thousands of years. However, it is relatively new to Western culture and is still seen as a form of alternative medicine. Acupuncture uses extremely thin needles (much thinner than a hypodermic needle) that are inserted into specific points on the body.

Acupuncture is based on the concept of an invisible energy system that circulates through our bodies along paths referred to as "meridians." This energy is called "chi." In ancient Chinese medical theory, many illnesses were thought to result when a person's chi was blocked and prevented from circulating properly.

Acupuncture uses needles to stimulate certain pressure points along the meridians, which is believed to correct the flow of chi in the body. Of course, the existence of "chi" is not universally acknowledged in Western medicine, and many doctors either question acupuncture's effectiveness or look for other explanations for it. However it works, many studies have shown that acupuncture is able to help people with a variety of conditions, including headaches.

Acupressure is a type of massage therapy that is based on the principles of acupuncture. Basically, the same pressure points are stimulated, but instead of using needles, strong pressure is applied by the therapists' fingers. This treatment is appropriate for people who want to try acupuncture but are terrified of needles.

Unlike acupuncture, which must be practiced by an acupuncturist, acupressure can be used at home. This makes it extremely convenient for treating headaches as they occur.

To try acupressure on yourself, you can very firmly massage the webbed area in between your thumb and forefinger, at the point where the finger bone and thumb bone meet and form a "V." This is considered one of the best pressure points for a headache, and it's also by far the easiest to reach on your own. You can also try massaging the points on each side of the neck vertebrae, right where the muscles of your neck meet your skull.

Homeopathy

Homeopathy is a system of medicine developed by Samuel Hahnemann , a German doctor, in the late 18th century. Homeopathic remedies follow the basic principles he laid out, namely, "like cures like" and the "law of infinitesimals."

The principle of "like cures like" basically states that a homeopathic remedy is chosen based on the symptoms it would produce if taken in large quantities in a healthy person. Homeopathic practitioners look for a substance that produces similar systems to what the patient is suffering. Since "like cures like," that substance will become the remedy.

The "law of infinitesimals" states that only very small dosages of the substance are necessary. These highly diluted doses prompt the body to react with a natural healing response that also corrects the original ailment.

There are various types of homeopathic remedies, each for a specific set of headache symptoms. The following list contains only a few examples. To find the correct remedy for your specific headache, it is recommended that you visit a licensed homeopath.

- **Belladonna** - Highly diluted solutions of belladonna are given when the patient experiences the following symptoms: extremely intense, stabbing pains on one side of the head, change in pupil size, flushing on one side of the face. Basically, all the symptoms of a classic cluster headache.

- **Natrum muriaticum** - This substance is recommended for throbbing headaches accompanied by disturbances of vision, symptoms that seem to indicate a migraine.

- **Gelsemium** is recommended as a homeopathic remedy for tension headaches, characterized by the feeling of having a rubber band drawn too tightly around the head.

Relaxation Techniques: Meditation and Visualization

Another drug-free method of treating headaches is to practice relaxation techniques to help relax your muscles and clear your mind of stress. Some people find techniques such as meditation and creative visualization to be quite helpful in stopping a headache.

Meditation

Meditation is one relaxation technique that has been studied for migraines. In the study, participants who meditated reported experiencing fewer migraines than people who did not meditate.

Many religions practice some form of meditation, so there are many different types of meditation. However, they all share a common goal: to help the participant learn to focus their attention entirely in the present moment. By living life one moment at a time, much of the stress that triggers headaches can be avoided or diminished.

Although meditation can be part of religious practice for some people, it certainly does not have to be. Many people practice meditation simply to gain greater mental discipline and better control over their thoughts, or to relieve stress.

Visualization and Guided Imagery

Visualization and guided imagery are powerful relaxation techniques. Like meditation, they rely on harnessing the power of the mind to heal the body. However, the difference between meditation and using guided imagery is that meditation is about clearing your mind completely. With guided imagery, on the other hand, instead of clearing your mind, you focus on a set of healing images.

For example, some people visualize standing in front of a giant medicine cabinet, choosing a bottle from the cabinet, and taking a pill. The idea is that simply imagining taking a headache pill that

you know will work causes the body to behave as if under the influence of the imaginary medication. Thus, your headache goes away.

Another sample guided imagery technique is to imagine your headache as a ball of red light that fills up the inside of your skull. If your head is pounding, imagine the light pulsing in time with your pain.

Now, imagine that your hands are producing a gentle azure light, like starlight. Bring your hands up to your head, placing them wherever the pain is most intense. Imagine the cool starlight from your hands chasing away the hot red light in your head, and you should feel your pain diminish along with the red light.

Hot and Cold Therapy

Using heat and cold to relieve pain is another natural method of treating a headache. For example, an ice cold compress applied to the temples relieves headache pain for some people. When the headache is accompanied by pain in the neck area, a warm compress will relax muscles and reduce headache-triggering tension. Alternating hot and cold showers will help increase circulation and may help with migraines.

Chapter 3

Preventing Headaches

For someone who suffers from chronic headaches, headache prevention is like finding the Holy Grail. Rather than simply treating headaches once they start, is it possible to actually stop headaches from occurring in the first place?

The good news is that it is definitely possible to manage your headaches! No method of headache prevention is foolproof, but even chronic headache sufferers can often reduce the frequency of headaches and improve their quality of life.

Preventative Drugs

Many of the drugs used to treat headaches can also be used to prevent them.

- Triptans, the most popular choice for treating migraines, are often used to prevent migraines.

- Other drugs used to treat migraines specifically are blood pressure drugs called beta blockers or calcium channel blockers, as well as some anti-seizure drugs.

- Antidepressants are given to prevent both migraines and tension headaches.

- For cluster headaches, lithium, corticosteroids, and calcium channel blockers may stop headaches from occurring during a cluster episode.

- **Botox -** Not just for beauty queens of a "certain age" anymore, botox injections have been shown to prevent migraine in preliminary trials. More research is currently being done to confirm the initial appearance of effectiveness.

- **Analgesics** should ***never*** be taken to prevent a headache, due to the risk of side effects and rebound headache. These drugs should only be used as a treatment!

Natural Remedies to Prevent Headaches

As is true with medical methods of preventing headaches, many natural methods that treat headaches will also prevent them if used on a daily basis. For example, a few leaves a day of feverfew has been shown to prevent migraines as well as treat them. Additionally, ginger and gingko biloba may act as a preventative for headaches. Regular visits to an acupuncturist also seem to help in many cases.

One example of a supplement that does not treat headaches but does prevent them is melatonin. Melatonin is a hormone that helps regulate the body's natural clock. Many cluster headache sufferers have a low level of the hormone, and melatonin seems to help prevent cluster headaches from occurring. However, it will not stop a cluster headache that is already in progress.

Keeping a Headache Diary

Keeping a headache diary is perhaps the most important part of any prevention routine. A "headache diary" will allow you to keep track of your headaches and discover what triggers them.

For example, try to remember what you ate or drank the last time you had a headache. What was the weather like? Did anything stressful happen that day? Chances are, you don't remember anymore, even if it was just a few days ago.

A headache diary is crucial because it allows you to write down all of the possible factors that could have triggered your headache. Then, you can begin looking for patterns until you isolate your own personal headache triggers.

Start by comparing your headache diary entry with the common triggers for the type of headache you are experiencing. If your headaches don't seem to correlate with any of the triggers mentioned in the book, simply start looking for patterns. Look at your entry and for every day that you had a headache, think: What does today have in common with last time I had a headache?

If your headache triggers turn out to be something that's easily avoided, such as a certain type of food, you can consider cutting the trigger out of your life completely.

Some triggers, of course, will be uncontrollable factors like stress, or the weather. While you cannot hope to avoid these types of factors completely, once you realize that they are setting off headaches you can take preventative steps as soon as you are exposed to the trigger.

To help you get started on your diary, here is an example of a sample page:

Date and Time	
Warning signs/Aura	
Foods eaten today	
Weather	
Stress level, emotional state	
Hours slept last night	
Daily activities leading up to headache	
Duration of headache	

Once you understand what causes a headache, it is often much easier to treat and prevent. Hopefully, this book has given you the knowledge you need to manage your headaches and improve your quality of life!