

How to Cure Your Tension Headache

By Dr. Hall

Tension, or muscle contraction, headaches are the most common type of headache caused by stress. Many of my patients with this kind of headache call it a “migraine” and many have even been started on Imetrex® or some similar migraine medicine by another practitioner. Imetrex® and other tryptans like it do work for this kind of headache to some degree because they have some muscle-relaxant properties. But this kind of headache is eminently preventable. You can learn to stop them in their tracks and not need any medications for them.

How do you know if your particular headache is a tension headache? Typically, there is tightness in your neck and shoulders. If you are not sure, try putting your chin on your chest and see if there is any tightness or pulling in the back of your neck or upper thoracic spine. Also, see if there are any knots or tender points in your traps or other muscles around your shoulder blades. If a muscle is too tight for too long, it’s going to hurt. Try this: make a muscle with your arm. Hard as you can. Now, hold it there for three days.

The headache also tends to start at the back of your head, arch up over the top and drill in behind your eyes. This is because there is a membrane that covers your skull bone, called the periosteum, and it is full of pain fibers. The periosteum attaches at the back of your head where all your neck muscles attach and covers the skull and attaches again in the front by your eyebrows. The occipital nerves in the back of the head and the supraorbital nerves right above your eyes come out of the skull bone and can get trapped and irritated by the tight periosteum. If pushing on that spot that is just below the edge of your eyebrow about a half an inch out from the bridge of your nose gives you some relief, or, if you’ve been diagnosed with occipital neuritis, had steroid shots into your occipital nerves or gotten relief of your headache by botox, you have muscle contraction headaches and this exercise will help you.



Classic migraines have a warning of some sort, often called “auras”. They generally only involve one side of your head, and often go away when you sleep. The pain can make the light hurt your eyes, make you intolerant of loud noises, and even make you vomit. Tension headaches do not have auras, usually involve both sides of your head and can last for days. The pain can be just as bad as a classic migraine and make the light hurt your eyes, sounds hurt your ears,

and make you vomit. Often you find yourself tightening your neck and shoulders to wince against the pain, which just keeps it going.

There is another variant of the typical tension headache where the pain is mostly in the temples. This is often caused by clenching your teeth in your sleep, called “bruxism”, or carrying tension in your face during the day. The temporalis muscle, one of your jaw muscles, attaches to the skull bone above, in front of and behind your ears. They also can pull on the periosteum. If you are bruxing, often your dentist can tell, your partner can tell, or you may have soreness or

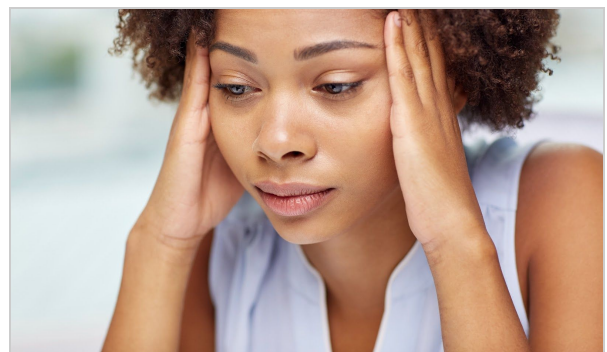


clicking in your jaw joints. Bite plates can protect your teeth, but you still bite on them and affect your jaw joints and temporalis muscles. Bruxism happens in your sleep, so you often need something like this exercise to get it to stop. Bruxism is also preventable with the practice I’m going to show you.

This treatment strategy for tension headaches relies on a few basic principles. Muscles only do what nerves tell them to do. They don’t act on their own (unless you’re having a Charlie horse). So, if the muscles in your neck, shoulders, or jaw are too tight, that means there are nerves telling them to be too tight. We want to find the answers to these two questions: where are those nerves getting their orders, and what perceived need are they trying to meet?

The muscles that are causing your headaches are voluntary muscles. That means that your conscious mind has access to and control over the nerves that tell them what to do. It is easier for most people to move their head up and down and from side to side than it is to make their pupils get bigger and smaller. That is because the muscle that makes up the pupil is considered an involuntary muscle: the neurons that tell it what to do are buried deeper in the unconscious part of the mind and cannot be accessed without a lot of specific practice.

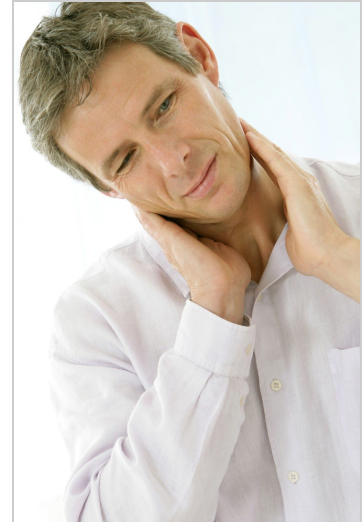
The problem with the neck and shoulder muscles is that, not only are they voluntary muscles, they are also postural muscles. That means that they are used to hold your head up. You generally don’t have to consciously think about doing that. So, since these muscles are both voluntary and involuntary at the same time, the neurons that tell these muscles what to do hang out right at the border between the conscious and unconscious mind. Your conscious mind tells them to move your head around when you want to; the unconscious mind tells them to hold your head up when you are thinking



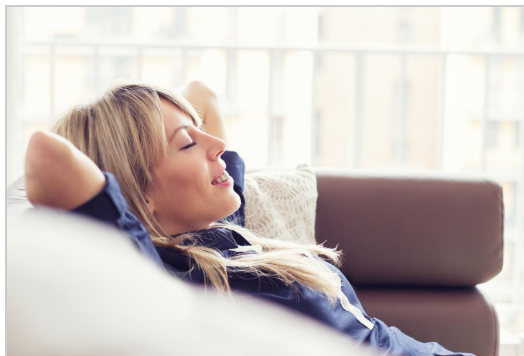
about other things. This keeps you from flopping over like a quadriplegic when you are not focused on your neck.

This makes your postural muscles very much like your breathing. When you want to breathe, in order to speak, sing, or play the flute, for example, you can. When you get busy doing other things, you just keep breathing and don't have to think about it. But, what often happens to your breathing when you are stressed? Right, it is often shallow and rapid, some people even unconsciously hyperventilate.

Stress also affects the tension in your postural muscles. In tension headaches, the order to be too tight crosses over into the unconscious part of your mind and becomes the default setting. So, you can consciously tune into your neck and shoulder muscles, see that they are tight, tell them to relax, and they will. But, as soon as you get busy doing something else, up your shoulders go again. And bruxism's happening in your sleep, again, directed by your unconscious mind. You don't even get the chance to tell those muscles to relax.



So, what you need in order to resolve these headaches, in addition to making yourself impervious to stress through the Taming the Bear class, is a way to get into your unconscious mind and reset the default setting back to normal postural tone. This often requires understanding the perceived need the tension is attempting to meet, or, in the case of bruxism, what you're chewing on in your sleep, and finding different and better ways to meet those needs or solve those problems.



Use the accompanying guided meditation to do all this. The recording is necessarily generic and open-ended. So, feel free to fill in the general areas with your own information, insights, issues, and such. Using this meditation gets easier and more effective with practice. Eventually, you will be able to touch in with how your muscles are doing throughout the day and it will only take you a few seconds.

So, make yourself comfortable, either sitting or lying down, turn off your cell phone, close the door, hang out the "do not disturb" sign, and give this time to yourself. Remember, you do not have to live with these headaches!