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June: National Headache Awareness Month

According to the National Headache Foundation (NHF), over 45 million Americans get chronic (re-occurring) headaches. Headaches are one of the most common pain-related health problems. In fact, for half that number, the pounding pain will be severe and possibly disabling.

For most of us, though, relief is as close as the medicine cabinet: we spend more than 4 billion dollars every year on over-the-counter (OTC) pain relievers.

Just what is a headache?

Most often, headache pain is caused by one of two things.

- 1) An inflammation, spasm or stretching in the scalp, in the membranes that cover the brain and in the muscles of the face and jaw.
- 2) A temporary distortion of the blood vessels that supply the brain. The vessels tighten, then relax and expand. The enlarged blood vessels press against nerves, causing pain. A shortage of serotonin, a chemical in the brain, can cause the vessels to constrict.

In general, headaches fall into three classes: tension, migraine and cluster. The first step in controlling chronic headache pain is pinpointing the nature of its causes and symptoms.

Tension headaches

The most common type of headache (accounting for about 90 percent) is the tension type. Some people describe them as a band of pressure or tightness around the head, at the back of the neck or at the base of the skull. Some can last weeks, months -- even years.

Migraine headaches

Unlike tension headaches, you can blame migraines on those temporary changes in the diameter of blood vessels serving the brain and scalp.

While some people call any severe headache a migraine, the real thing is usually much more intense; throbbing pain accompanied by nausea and even

vomiting. Migraines can also bring visual changes and heightened sensitivity to light, sounds and smells.

Migraines affect 28 million Americans, who often inherit the affliction. Migraines have also been tied to diet, stress, menstruation and environmental changes.

Cluster headaches

Cluster headaches afflict about a million Americans (mostly men and mostly at night). Like migraines, cluster headaches follow changes in the brain's blood flow. Unlike migraines, they last less than an hour and occur in predictable "clusters," three- to eight-week periods in which they can strike several times a day.

Cluster headaches produce extremely severe pain, incapacitating victims even more than migraines. But cluster headaches can enter long periods of remission.

The causes

Doctors aren't sure what causes migraines or cluster headaches, but they've identified some foods and food additives that can trigger a headache.

For example, many have heard of the "Chinese restaurant syndrome." It's the headache some of us get after eating some Chinese foods. It comes from the food additive monosodium glutamate (MSG), also found in some frozen foods, lunch meats, canned and dry soups, and many other processed foods.

Nitrites are another class of chemicals that can produce headaches in some people. Nitrites are used to preserve bacon, sausage, canned ham, smoked fish, and other meats.

And certain foods that contain tyramine (such as hard cheeses, peas, navy and lima beans, fresh bread, yogurt, alcoholic beverages, and chocolate) might trigger headaches -- especially in people who get migraines.

Only 5 to 7 percent of the Americans who suffer chronic headaches seek medical help. But the NHF stresses that if you're getting headaches almost daily, you need a doctor. Ditto if your headaches are increasingly unresponsive to OTC medications.

Take your headache to a doctor if you experience "neurological manifestations" (such as flashing lights, blurred vision or slurred speech, numbness, weakness or less feeling in a limb), or if the headaches seem to be triggered by exertion such as exercise, sneezing or bowel movements.

Other red flags:

- Headaches three or more times per week
- Sudden or very severe head pain, especially if you were previously pain free
- A headache you'd call the worst you've ever had
- A headache after a head or neck injury
- A headache accompanied by fever, nausea, shortness of breath or vomiting, or unexpected symptoms of eyes, ears, nose or throat, or a stiff neck

Treating your headache

OTC medications, such as aspirin, acetaminophen and ibuprofen, are the first line of defense for treating the common headache. Below are some other methods:

- Place an ice pack on the forehead, eyes, temples or nape of the neck.

- Take a warm bath or shower to help relieve tension.
- Rest in a quiet, darkened room.
- Use simple relaxation techniques -- breathing deeply, relaxing your muscles and using visual images.
- Try progressive relaxation. Tense your toes slowly as you breathe in, then relax your toes as you let go of the tension and exhale. Work your way up the body, tensing and relaxing other muscles.
- Exercise for 30 minutes at least three to four times a week. Regular aerobic exercise slows your resting heart rate and releases painkilling chemicals in the brain.
- Avoid foods associated with the onset of your headaches.
- Limit caffeine intake.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Don't skip meals.
- Have your eyes checked.

Learn more at <http://www.headaches.org>.

5 Exercises to prevent an aching neck

One of the things many of us take for granted is the mobility and comfort of our neck. It's only when we lose that mobility and it becomes painful to make even slight movements that we wish we had taken preventive measures. The information and exercises discussed in this article are to strengthen and stretch a normal neck. Anyone with preexisting neck pain or a spine condition should check with their healthcare provider before doing these exercises.

According to the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (AAPMR), while neck pain can be the result of stress, age or injury, it is most often associated with poor posture.

Necks need exercise, too

The muscles in your neck can be exercised and strengthened just like other muscles in your body. Plus, exercise will improve your neck's range of motion. Remember to check with your doctor before doing neck exercises, and discontinue them if any movement causes you pain.

Before you begin a neck exercise, it's important to find the proper starting position for your head. This helps prevent exercise-related injuries. Start with your head positioned squarely over your shoulders, then move it

straight forward and then back. This back or base position is your starting point.

For each of the following exercises, begin with five repetitions and build up to 10:

Rotations: Sitting, turn your head slowly to the left and then to the right as far as you can, comfortably.

Shoulder circles: While standing, raise your shoulders straight up, then move them in a circle around, down and back up again. Circle in both directions.

Side stretches: While standing, stretch your neck slowly to the left trying to touch your ear to your shoulder. Repeat on the right side.

Resistance exercises: Place your right hand against your head above your ear and gently press, resisting the movement with your neck. Do the same with your left hand on the other side.

Head lifts: Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Lift and lower your head, keeping your shoulders flat on the floor. Next, lie on one side and lift your head toward the ceiling. Repeat this movement on your other side and while lying on your stomach.

Easy preventive measures

Proper neck posture can protect you from neck pain. These suggestions from the AAPMR can help prevent the misuse or overuse of your neck.

- Don't sit in one place for a long time. If you work at a desk, it's easy to forget this. Try placing items around your office so that you are forced to get up or stretch to retrieve them.
- Maintain good posture for your neck. Adjust your desk chair so your hips are slightly higher than your knees. Your head and neck will then naturally assume the correct position. When traveling, place a small pillow or rolled up towel between your neck and the headrest.

- Don't sleep with too many pillows or with a pillow that's too thick.
- When talking on the phone, don't cradle the phone between head and shoulder. If you're on the phone often, switch to a headset or speakerphone.
- When reading or typing from other materials, raise the pages to eye level.
- If you use eyeglasses, keep your prescription current so you don't have to crane your neck forward to see clearly.

Sun and sunscreens

It's summertime. People spend long hours in the sun. Before you head out to the beach, park, or picnic, you'll want to pick up some sunscreen. But should you buy SPF 15? SPF 30? How about 45? Should you get a sun block? A sunscreen? Something that's waterproof?

If you're confused by the numbers and types of sunscreen, you're not alone. Many Americans, it seems, are so confused by sunscreens that they don't even use them. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), only about 30 percent of adults regularly use sunscreen and many of them don't use a sufficient amount. An adult should use enough sunscreen to fill a shot glass to cover arms, legs, neck and face. If you are using insect repellent or other lotions, apply the sunscreen first.

To help consumers select products that best suit their needs, sunscreens are labeled with SPF numbers. SPF stands for "sun protection factor" and refers to the sunscreen's ability to protect against the sun's ultraviolet (UV) radiation. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) says the higher the SPF number, the more sunburn protection the product provides. You should use a sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15, which means you can stay in the sun 15 times as long as without the sunscreen and get the same level of sunburn.

The SPF number refers only to protection from UVB rays – the kind that cause sunburn. Your sunscreen, however, should also protect against UVA rays, which is less likely to cause sunburn but is one cause of aging skin. UVA radiation penetrates the skin more deeply than UVB radiation and produces free radicals that attack the collagen (connective tissue) of the deeper skin layers and the blood vessels. In addition, the free radicals damage DNA and interfere with the body's immune response.

How do sunscreens work?

When UV rays strike the skin, they cause changes, including mutations in DNA. These mutations affect how well the DNA controls cell division, and can lead to cancer, experts say. The longer the skin is exposed to the sun, the greater the risk of developing skin problems.

Sunscreens work by absorbing and reflecting UV rays, preventing them from penetrating the skin. There are two general types of sunscreens: physical sunscreens, such as zinc or titanium oxide, which contain particles that scatter and reflect sunlight from the skin; and chemical sunscreens, which absorb the UV rays.

All children over 6 months of age and all adults should wear sunscreen. Lighter skinned people, particularly those with red or blond hair, are at greatest risk for burning.

Remember, sunscreen use alone will not prevent all of the possible harmful effects of the sun.

Tips for avoiding the sun

Stay out of the sun, particularly from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., when the sunlight -- and the UV rays -- are strongest. Look for shade, but be aware that a beach umbrella or shade tree can't block all UV rays. And a bright beach or snow-covered ground causes the UV rays to bounce around.

You are still at risk on cloudy days, because clouds block only about 20 percent of UV rays.

If you must be out in the sun, cover up with a loose-fitting, long-sleeved shirt and pants to protect your skin. Wear a hat with a four-inch brim to protect your face, head, neck and ears.

Wear sunglasses that block as many UVA and UVB rays as possible. Sunglasses that wrap around your eyes are best, because they block UV rays from the sides.

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Apply sufficient amount of sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15 and one that offers protection from both UVA and UVB rays. Use at least an ounce of sunscreen each time you apply it. Reapply every couple hours, or more frequently if you are swimming or sweating.

Remember that water doesn't block UV rays. Even if you spend most of your day in the water, you still need sunscreen.

Children need protection from the sun, too. Give your child a wide-brimmed hat and don't forget the sunscreen, if your child is older than 6 months.

Warning signs of skin cancer

Up to a million Americans are diagnosed with skin cancer each year, and experts say that number is on the rise.

Skin cancer comes in three types: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma. The first two types are the most common forms of skin cancer and are easily treated. If left untreated, however, they can cause disfigurement, but they aren't deadly.

Although melanoma is less common, it is serious. If caught early, it is almost always curable. Melanoma is much more likely than the other two forms of skin cancer to spread to other organs in the body.

The American Cancer Society and other experts urge people to regularly examine their skin for new moles or moles that change their shape or color.

The risk factors for melanoma include moles, particularly a type called an atypical mole; fair skin; family history of melanoma; people whose immune system has been suppressed; large doses of UV radiation through sun exposure; and severe, blistering sunburns, especially during childhood.

Nutrition: Vitamin B-6

Vitamin B-6 is essential for good health. It allows the body to use protein to build and repair cells, and helps the blood transport oxygen. Too little vitamin B-6 can cause a deficiency and result in a type of anemia. Vitamin B-6 also helps maintain your blood glucose (sugar) within a normal range.

So, how do you get enough vitamin B-6? First, there are some things you should know about vitamin B-6.

It is a water-soluble vitamin. What this means is that you can't store it so to keep the body functioning at its best, you must get it from the foods you eat every single day. Vitamin B-6 is found in a variety of foods like beans, meat, poultry, fish, and some fruits and vegetables.

Cooking can destroy or diminish vitamin B-6 – as can long-term storage. Cooking in water can dissolve the vitamin. To retain vitamin B-6 when preparing foods you should:

- Serve fruits raw
- Cook foods in a minimal amount of water
- Cook for the shortest possible time
- Roast or broil meat and poultry

You can also look for foods that have been fortified with B-6, like some ready-to-eat cereals and breads.

How much should you get? The Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) is the average daily dietary intake level that is sufficient to meet the nutrient requirements of nearly all (97 to 98 percent) healthy individuals in each life-stage and gender group. See the box to find your RDA.

To learn more about Vitamin B-6 visit the Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) at <http://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/vitaminb6.asp>.

U.S. RDAs for vitamin B-6 for adults, in milligrams				
Life-Stage	Men	Women	Pregnancy	Lactation
Ages 19-50	1.3 mg	1.3 mg		
Ages 51+	1.7 mg	1.5 mg		
All Ages	1.9 mg	2.0 mg		

"Never let the fear of striking out get in your way."

- George Herman "Babe" Ruth