

Can Physical Therapy help my patients relieve their Headaches?

According to the National Headache Foundation, more than 45 million Americans suffer from chronic, recurring headaches. They may present to their doctor with complaints of frontal, temporal, occipital or retro-orbital pain; or they may describe dizziness, tinnitus, light-headedness, nausea or blurred vision. Causes may include stress, allergies, caffeine or alcohol withdrawal, or sleep disorders. However, a vast majority of the causes include musculoskeletal dysfunctions that can be treated without medications, via physical therapy.

Postural dysfunctions are one of the most common causes of headaches. Because of chronic, poor postural habits either during work, leisure or sleep, the soft tissues of the neck and shoulders can become shortened, weakened or overstretched. Forward head posture (FHP) combined with protracted shoulders leads to muscle contractures of the suboccipitals, scalenes, pectoralis minors and majors, and sternocleidomastoids. In contrast, the middle and lower trapezius muscles and the rhomboids become weak and inefficient at holding the skeleton up against gravity. These aggravated soft tissues can refer pain to the head. Undue pressure at the facet joints of the upper cervical spine can occur, and nerve root compression and intervertebral disc involvement are common sequelae as well. This syndrome of FHP is often implicated in temporomandibular joint dysfunction (TMJD), and correcting the patients' postural problems can eliminate TMJD problems, facial pain, bruxism and headaches.

Sleep disorders, another cause of headaches, may be exacerbated by patients in pain. Education by a physical therapist on proper sleeping positions for the neck and upper extremities has frequently improved patients' quality and duration of sleep, thereby reducing or eliminating headaches.

Physical therapy offers a wide range of options for patients who wish to treat their headaches without medicine. Correcting postural dysfunctions, thereby eliminating pain and headaches, is one of the specialties of the physical therapist. Postural education will include instruction on proper work station set-up, sleeping positions or proper body mechanics for leisure activities such as prolonged computer usage, reading or art projects. Postural retraining can consist of an individually designed program of exercises to stretch the shortened muscle groups, and increase the endurance of the weak ones. This retraining ties directly into neuromuscular re-education of the body, and increasing the patient's proprioceptive awareness to break the poor postural habits. Postural (McConnell) taping is another valuable asset of the physical therapist to give continuous tactile feedback regarding appropriate posture, even after the patient has left the clinic.

Physical therapists (PTs) skilled in craniosacral therapy, myofascial release or osteopathic techniques have excellent outcomes in patients with chronic headaches. Often times

traumas, such as car accidents, falls or athletic ventures have altered the natural movement patterns of the cranial bones, causing spasms of the vascular or muscular tissues of the skull.

Other tools of the PT include electric stimulation for relaxation and pain modulation, cervical traction when indicated, stress management or visual imagery techniques and biofeedback to reduce excessive muscle activation.

In summary, headaches come from a plethora of causes and should be evaluated by a physician. Fortunately, a large number of those causes can be successfully treated, without recurrence, by the skilled hands of a physical therapist.

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