



1-800-636-3971

Prince George's County

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Headaches: The Facts

By James L. Holding, DC, CCSP,
Board Certified Chiropractic
Sports Physician

Many people use prescription or over-the-counter drugs for headache relief. Occasionally treating a headache with aspirin or similar pain drugs may not do much harm. However, pain medications can have serious and even deadly side effects when used repeatedly for recurring chronic headaches. That is where chiropractic may be the better choice.

Different things can cause headaches. But many headaches arise from problems in the spine and particularly in the upper part of the neck (cervicogenic) where nerves that serve the head and face can easily be irritated by spinal misalignment in the neck causing pain in the head and face.¹

Over the years studies have shown that chiropractic care is often effective for tension headaches as well as migraine. One recent study is particularly interesting in that it compared chiropractic care to a popular prescription drug often used to prevent tension headaches called Amitriptyline. The patients in this study had suffered with a least one headache per week over a period of three months or more. The patients were divided into two groups. One would receive chiropractic care and the other

would get the drug. Both groups were allowed to use over-the-counter pain medications as needed for symptoms. For a two-week baseline period they measured headache pain and frequency levels and pain medication usage in both groups. Then they received either the drug or chiropractic care for six weeks. They were then monitored for another four weeks for follow-up.

Both groups improved at similar rates from their baseline measures during the six weeks of care. However, fully 82% of the group taking the drug suffered with side effects and five dropped out due to the severity of the side effects. In contrast, only 43% of the chiropractic patients reported any side effects and these were only neck stiffness after their first chiropractic visit.² The advantage of chiropractic care in side effects alone is significant enough, but the real advantages of chiropractic care showed up in the follow-up period. At the end of those four weeks the chiropractic group continued to enjoy a 42% reduction in headache frequency, a 32% reduction in headache intensity, a 30% reduction in pain medication usage, and a 16% improvement in functional health. The group given the drug, however, reverted back to their baseline values or was slightly worse in all outcome measures.³

The study illustrates that drugs

for headaches often have negative side effects and are of no lasting value. The headaches came right back for the drug group. There is also an additional risk of taking drugs for headaches in what some call the "rebound headache". After long-term use the medication may give partial relief, but the headache returns as the drug wears off and is often more severe than the original headache. To treat it with drugs the patient will need more and more of the medication. Instead of subjecting yourself to risky drug treatments for your symptoms, try chiropractic. Gentle manipulation (manual) therapy is often effective at providing long-term relief of your symptoms, without the dangerous side effects of over-the-counter prescription drugs.

If you suffer with headaches, have your spine checked by a spinal expert. The research indicates that chiropractic evaluation and treatment is safe, affordable and effective.

1 C. Masarky. "Headaches, Drugs and Chiropractic." July 30, 2005, Dynamic Chiropractic, Vol. 23, No. 16.

2 P. Boine, Spinal Manipulation vs. Amitriptyline for the Treatment of Chronic Tension-type Headaches. Journal of Manipulative and Physiological Therapeutics, Vol. 18

3 Ibid