

How to relieve a stress headache

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You had a rough day at work and got stuck in traffic on the way home, and suddenly your head starts pounding.

Stress headaches can be debilitating in the moment, but you don't have to suffer indefinitely.

If you're struggling with [stress](#), you're not alone. More than one-quarter of adults in the United States reported they're too stressed out to function, according to a recent survey from the [American Psychological Association](#).

Can stress cause headaches? Yes, in fact the most common type of primary headache is a tension headache, also referred to as a muscle tension headache or stress headache, according to [Harvard Health](#). Tension headaches may be episodic, meaning that they occur less than 15 days a month; if they occur more than 15 days a month for more than three months in a row, they are called chronic tension headaches, according to the [Cleveland Clinic](#).

Here, experts break down how to relieve a stress headache and how to help prevent one from happening in the first place.

How does stress cause headaches?

Stress triggers the "fight-or-flight" response that then stimulates [physical changes](#) that can contribute to headaches. These include the following:

- Neck, shoulder, scalp, face and jaw muscles tensing
- Teeth grinding
- Problems with sleeping
- Meal skipping that imbalances blood sugar levels

Emotional stressors like depression and anxiety, as well as physical stressors, like prolonged sitting with poor posture or straining the eyes, can also cause stress headaches. Stress headaches are most common in adults, more in women than men, and in older teens, according to the

[National Library of Medicine](#). People with heightened sensitivity to pain may be more likely to experience stress headaches, [Mayo Clinic experts](#) noted.

Stress headache symptoms

The stress headache area is typically around the upper part of the head or localized to the upper sides or front of the head. The pain is usually mild to moderate and feels like a wide belt is tightening around the head or as if both sides of the head are squeezed together. It may also feel like constant pressure to the front of the face or to the head or neck. There may also be light and sound sensitivity, but no auras as with migraines, according to the [National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke](#).

Stress headache pain is generally mild or moderate, not severe or throbbing. It may be on one or both sides of the head. In a recent study of over 2,000 [medical students](#) that was published in the journal [Neurology India](#), those who experienced both stress and sleep deprivation had headaches that were primarily on one side of the upper head, pulsating and of moderate intensity. Some also experienced nausea. Nausea and vomiting, however, are typically absent in stress headaches.

How to relieve a stress headache

Treatment for stress headaches first involves identifying the cause. A good strategy is to keep a headache journal or make calendar notes each time you experience a headache. Observe potential stress triggers—[sleep deprivation](#), long work hours, prolonged sitting, or feeling anxious or depressed. Over time, you may notice a consistent connection between certain circumstances and your headaches, and you can create strategies to avoid triggers or to change your response to deal with stress more

effectively.

"If you identify any habits that may make you feel better in the moment, but have negative long-term effects, take steps to change these coping mechanisms," [Thea Gallagher](#), a clinical assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at NYU Langone Health in New York City, told [HealthDay](#) recently.

Typical treatments include the following, according to Harvard Health:

- Over-the-counter pain medicines like aspirin, ibuprofen or acetaminophen
- Muscle tension relief in tight neck and shoulder areas with massage, heat or ice
- Relaxation techniques
- Deep breathing exercises

Other [evidence-based treatments](#) include:

- Acupuncture
- Supervised exercise
- Manual joint mobilization techniques
- Psychological treatment to reduce stress

If symptoms persist, consult a health care provider.

Stress headache prevention tips

Familiarize yourself with your [headache](#) triggers. For example, if you notice you tend to get headaches when you're sleep-deprived, schedule extra sleep after a few nights of sleep deficit. If you find yourself feeling irritable or anxious, pause to notice what's going on in your life that may be causing those feelings. Try to take a nature break to stop the stress

cycle. A Cornell University study published recently in the journal [Frontiers in Psychology](#) found that just 10 minutes of outdoor time can significantly reduce stress and improve well-being.

If you can't get out into nature, try relaxation exercises, deep breathing, mindfulness meditation, guided imagery and mind-body exercises like tai chi or restorative yoga. A [healthy lifestyle](#) that consists of [physical activity](#), healthy foods, adequate hydration, good sleep and social support also helps reduce stress and tension headaches.

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