New approaches ease pain for headache sufferers

By KATHLEEN GREEN
Special Contributor
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Chronic headaches can be excruciating, debilitating and sometimes life-changing.

At least 90 percent of Americans suffer from some sort of headache each year, according to the National Headache Foundation.

Dr. Steven P. Herzog, director of the Headache Institute at Texas Neurology in Dallas, says his office sees hundreds of headache sufferers every week, mostly migraine patients desperate for solutions. Diagnosis starts with getting a headache history and proper examination.

Tumors, infections and brain aneurysms have to be ruled out first, though the probability of those is less than 1 percent, Herzog says.

Types of headaches

There are three primary headache disorders — tension, cluster and migraine.

TENSION: This mild-to-moderate headache feels like a tightening band around the head. Despite its name, it's not necessarily brought on by stress. It often responds to over-the-counter medication, rest and hydration, Herzog says.

CLUSTER: These headaches also are known as "alarm clock headaches" for awakening sufferers in the middle of the night. Found in men at five times the rate women experience them, cluster headaches typically center on one side of the head at the temple or behind the eye. Duration and intensity decrease with proper treatment. Preventive treatment, as prescribed by a doctor, includes calcium-channel blockers, Topamax, corticosteroids, lithium carbonate or melatonin, Herzog says. Upon headache onset, oxygen, Lidocaine or injections of Imirex are often used.

MIGRAINE: They are caused by a genetic disorder in which the location, characteristics, timing and onset can vary, Herzog says. Women are three times more likely to have them than men. An estimated 35 million to 50 million people in the United States suffer from migraines, he says. Only 10 million are properly diagnosed, however, and only half of those get proper treatment. In fact, Herzog says, about 80 percent of headaches diagnosed as sinus headaches are really migraines.

"There's no disorder that's more misunderstood, misdiagnosed and mistreated than migraines," he says.

Migraine patients are often sensitive to light, sound and smells. Associated auras affect about 20 percent of sufferers.

Major inroads have been made in treatment for the most chronic headache sufferers (those who have more than 15 headache days a month).

Botox injections provided relief for 70 percent of patients who participated in double-blind placebo-controlled trials in 2008 and 2009 at the Headache Institute, Herzog says. The FDA recently approved Botox injections for this use, and they are often covered by insurance.

Chronic headache sufferers are desperate to find relief, but everyone responds differently, he says.

The migraines first hit Kim Migliaccio of Flower Mound in her late 20s, often forcing her to leave work and lose income.

"I would have a migraine for three days straight with no relief," says Migliaccio, chief financial officer at Mig Financial.

Migliaccio tried ice packs, Excedrin, Imirex injections and hydrocodone, then finally turned to a chiropractor.

"Medication alone generally won't make a patient better unless they're willing to make some lifestyle changes that really begin with exercise, proper diet, hydration, proper sleep and rest, stress-reducing techniques, trigger-factor modulation and then medication," Herzog says.

Rebound headaches

Many patients run into trouble when they too often (three times a week or more) reach for over-the-counter pain relievers. What seems like a quick fix could lead to more serious issues, including rebound headaches or medication-overuse headaches. Migraine patients are particularly susceptible to medication-overuse headaches, though it's not yet clear why.

"It's easy to take the Advil, Aleve or whatever ... for the moment not knowing what kind of trouble you can get into down the road, let alone rebound, kidney failure, liver failure, all kinds of other complications that can occur from overutilizing over-the-counter medication," Herzog says.

At her chiropractor's recommendation, Migliaccio tried massage. Her twice-monthly visits have cut her migraine episodes exponentially.

Chiropractor Jade Malay with North Dallas Spine and Total Health says that when bones go out of alignment they sometimes put pressure on the nerves, which can trigger headaches.

At her clinic, patients start with a massage before their chiropractic adjustment.

"The idea is to do not only an adjustment to the spine to correct the alignment, but also to relieve that nerve pressure," she says.
Holistic approach

In the past 10 years, with better headache training programs, more physicians are including nontraditional approaches such as herbal therapies, says Dr. Fred Freitag, medical director at Baylor Neuroscience Center Comprehensive Headache Center.

In clinical trials, the butterbur herb has proved most effective.

"Butterbur is top of the hit parade for people who have episodic migraines," he says. "It has the same likelihood of preventing migraines as any of the best prescription medications, like Topomax."

Patients should be aware that unregulated herbs come with risks, says Freitag, who helped write the American Academy of Neurology guidelines for nontraditional therapies in migraine treatment. Choosing a name brand, such as Petadol, is important, he says, because it eliminates possible toxic levels of the butterbur root.

Magnesium also has proved beneficial and safe for women with menstrual migraines, he says.

For those who have the time and patience, biofeedback can be effective in combating headaches. A machine is used to teach patients awareness of their muscles, heart rate and more, giving them the tools to manipulate them. When practiced regularly, it can be as effective as any top-tier medication, Freitag says.

Not as well proven in relieving migraines is acupuncture, which has had mixed results.

"We know acupuncture modifies the control of the release of the brain's natural painkillers, and that's probably how it helps," he says. "That's very effective for treating a migraine when it first starts. So if you're close to your acupuncturist and come down with a migraine, it could be real effective."

Some alternative treatments could take months to start working, but for those who wish to avoid taking medication, these options are solid, Freitag says.

Chiropractor Malay says the fact that health care is becoming much more integrative is a huge step forward for patients.

"It's nice to see we're all working together instead of 'you just need to take a pill and go home,'" Malay says.

Where to get help

National Headache Foundation:

Offers a physician finder, headache education, answers to frequently asked questions, a chat room and more. headaches.org

American Academy of Neurology: Information on treatment, the latest research and relevant articles. patients.aan.com

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine: Provides information about alternative treatments for headaches, including acupuncture and herbs. nccam.nih.gov