



Health & Wellness

Attention Headache Sufferers!

Your Chronic Daily Headache May Be Related to Your Neck

By Nesreen Suwan, MD



If you suffer from chronic daily headaches, the hidden sources causing those debilitating headaches may stem from your neck!

Injuries or disorders of the neck area such as acute whiplash injury, chronic

tension in the neck, bulging discs or joint arthritis, may contribute to those incapacitating headaches. When the main source of the headache is the cervical spine, those headaches are called "cervicogenic" headaches. Those headaches are frequently located in the back of the head, however headaches in the forehead, or behind, in and around the eyes are also common due to the "referred" pain pattern.

Cervicogenic headaches are common and are described by patients as severe, pounding, throbbing, stabbing and nauseating. Cervicogenic headaches have been ignored, overlooked or discredited, not because they do not occur, but because many doctors have not been trained to think of or in how to make the diagnosis. Even if they do know about the condition they may not have the facilities to diagnose or to treat.

Cervicogenic headaches may be experienced in conjunction with or coexisting with other common headache types such as migraine headaches. Cervicogenic headaches that may

result from acute whiplash injury or chronic neck tension, bulging discs or joint arthritis, may trigger migraine headaches as well.

TMJ and sinus sources, while small fractions of the etiologies of headaches and possible secondary contributors, can also set off a smoldering major complex headache. The neck area is a high stress zone and it should be evaluated in detail and treated aggressively in anyone with chronic or recurrent headaches. Patients with true migraines or cluster headaches will often also end up with compounding cervicogenic headaches.

Why do headache sufferers need to see a headache specialist?

As noted above, most headaches are combination of different headache types. For effective headache management and pain control, a detailed history and comprehensive neurological evaluation should be performed to identify the specific headache types (which often coexist together), to rule out other serious underlying medical conditions, so that the appropriate treatment may be prescribed.

Based on the headache type you are experiencing, your headache management specialist will discuss your treatment options and determine which option is best for you.

What types of headache treatments are available?

Effectual treatment may combine conservative modalities with medications or /and pain injections. Injections can take the form of muscle trigger point blocks, nerve blocks or epidural spinal injections. The most effective injections for cervicogenic headaches usually end up being x-ray guided facet joint blocks, especially of the upper facet levels. Only an experienced interventional pain management physician with extensive training should perform these procedures.

Pain injections may not be the first treatment option, but it may be considered if the patient fails to respond to standard conservative modalities. On the other hand, if headaches are very severe and debilitating, injections could be started from the very beginning. The main goal is to obtain maximum pain relief as quickly as possible in severe pain crises,



which may be achieved by pain injections and/or medications.

If the patient cannot tolerate medications, or if the patient is experiencing undesirable side effects from medications such as confusion, weight gain, drowsiness or stomach pain, injections could be started from the very beginning as well. The benefits of injections versus the risks of other headache treatments and disability should always be considered. Pain injections are covered by most insurance companies.

Other interventional procedures that could be considered in chronic daily headache management include, but are not limited, to Botox injection and peripheral nerve stimulation.

With all the great advances in headache management, there is no reason to let your headache control your life. Coping with the debilitating headaches or the side effects of too many medications is not supposed to be part of your life. Take the first step to be in charge of your life by conquering your headaches.

Dr Nesreen Suwan, a board certified neurologist and board certified electrodiagnostic medicine specialist, specializes in treatment of headaches and migraines and is Director of Midwest Headache Clinic. Dr. Suwan is highly recognized as a headache specialist and she is nationally known speaker in her field.

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