

Self- treatment guide for Headaches



Headaches are a symptom of different causes and affect many Australians often on a weekly or even daily basis. We have put together this booklet to help you identify areas that may be contributing to your headaches to improve your symptoms and get you back into the lifestyle you want to live.

Types of Headaches

There are several types of headache; migraine, tension-type, cervicogenic or combined. Primary headaches such as those with migraine and tension type headaches can get symptom relief from the below tips and manual therapy by a physiotherapist. This is especially true since they are commonly combined with mechanical impairments, however other factors may also be at play. A cervicogenic headache occurs secondary to a neck dysfunction and can greatly benefit from the below tips and physiotherapy treatment.

Neck Pain and Headache

If the nervous system receives excessive signals from the neck it can become sensitised and referred headaches can occur prior to any feeling of neck pain. Other individuals may notice a lack of neck range or pain/ stiffness in the neck. Cervicogenic headaches may be aggravated with neck movements, postures or worsens by the end of day or work week. Textbook cervicogenic headaches are intermittent and usually side dominant, however if neck dysfunction is bilateral or it is a mixed migraine or tension-type headache with cervicogenic contribution this may not be the case.

Headache Treatment

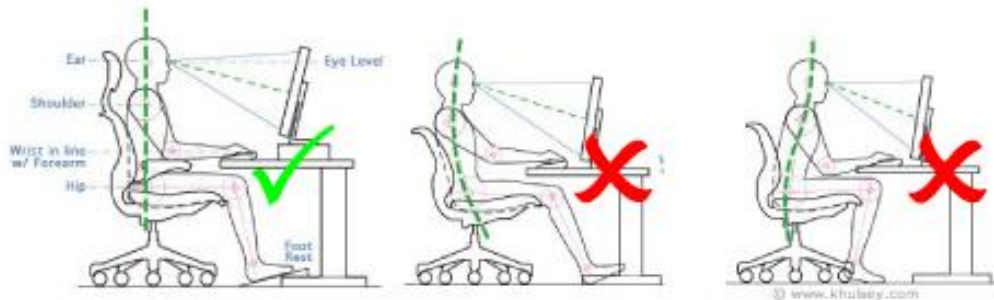
Using specific hands on assessment techniques, Barefoot physiotherapists can assess muscle and joint dysfunction in the neck, with a special focus on the upper neck which is most closely related to neck-caused headaches. Where the neck is a significant cause of headaches, treatment of these joints and muscles can help de-load the area and dampen down the sensitised nervous system which provides relief of headache symptoms. Therapists will also assess your various postures to ensure you are set up in the best way to prevent these joints from being re-aggravated. Call or book in with one of our physios to see if we might be suitable for you.

Good posture

Headaches often begin or can be aggravated due to prolonged or poor neck/ back positions. This results in accumulative strain- too much load being placed on the body over time. One of the best ways to minimise the build-up of strain on your body, is to change positions frequently (every 20minutes) and set yourself up in a good position to start. Follow these tips for good sitting posture

- Maintain a neutral spine. This means maintaining your 4 natural curves. This position minimises stress on your spine and helps prevent injury. This applies to sitting, standing and lifting postures.
- Ensure your lower back is supported by the chair or a cushion/towel. Your back muscles should be soft. Making sure your low back position is correct sets up your neck to also sit in a good position
- Keep your head upright, ears line with your shoulders.
- Shoulders should be relaxed back and down – the muscles on top of your shoulders should be soft

- Avoid positions that encourage 'slumping' or place your nerves on unnecessary tension, such as sitting with your legs straight out in front of you or with your feet up



Reducing strain on the neck and head

Muscles and joints become stiff/tight when they build up too much strain. Muscle releases are a great way to take load off the body. A lot of tight muscles have palpable “knots” or “trigger points” in them. To target these specific “hard or ropey” spots it is more effective to perform muscle releases (using a ball, pocket physio, foam roller, dry needling or trigger point massage) rather than doing a stretch. A muscle release is sustained pressure on a trigger point, at a specific angle, held for the duration of around 90 seconds for 2-3 different spots per muscle group.

Try releasing your pec and infraspinatus muscle to help reduce strain in your neck area and get your shoulders sitting better.

Pec – ball release on wall



- You can release your pec using a ball on the wall. The pec muscle runs from the sternum in your chest out to your shoulder. It is commonly tight as it gets closer to your shoulder
- Lean the pec muscle on the ball pushing into the wall where there is a corner or doorway
- Aim to find a spot in the muscle where the ball feels like it is pushing against resistance (something firm like a “knot” or “band” in the muscle).
- Hold each spot for 90 seconds
- Aim to find 2-3 spots per muscle group (minimum 3-5mins per muscle total)

Infraspinatus release with ball

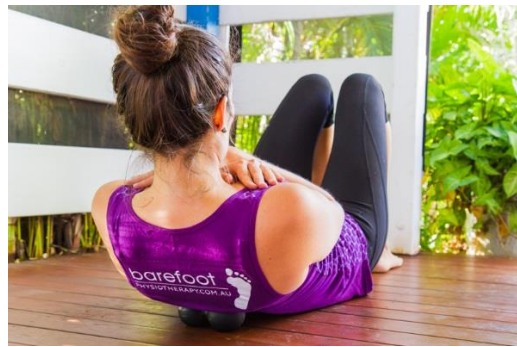
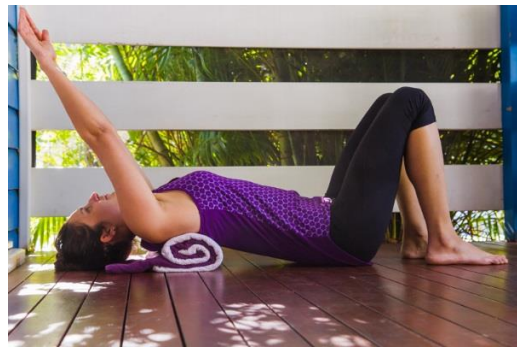


- The muscle you are aiming for is on the back of the shoulder blade. Bring one of your arms across your body, and place the ball on the back of that shoulder blade. Lean up against a wall to push the ball into this muscle.
- Roll the ball on the wall pushing into the muscle. Try to find a spot in the muscle where your ball feels like it is pushing against resistance (something firm like a “knot” or “band” in the muscle).
- Hold each spot for 90 seconds
- Aim to find 2-3 spots per muscle group (minimum 3-5mins per muscle total)
- It is common to feel pressure pain referring to the front of your shoulder. This should go away once you stop the release.

Mobilising the joints of your upper back is also a great way to help deload the strain placed on your neck and head.

Thoracic stretch:

- Place a foam roller, a firmly rolled single/double towel or a set of Bakballs under your upper/mid back. Bend your knees up with feet on the ground.
- You can place a low pillow under your head if needed/more comfortable
- Option 1: Fold your arms across your chest and lean back. Breath in and out x 10.
- Option 2: Take your arms up and over your head whilst breathing larger breaths than usual. Repeat x 10. Also, try alternating arms x 10. Find 3-4 different parts of your upper back to release with this stretch.



If you have tried the above suggestions and feel they are not resolving your headaches, it is likely the main underlying cause of your problem has not been addressed. If this is the case then having a physiotherapist check all of your nerves, muscles and joints is the next best step to understanding what is going on and helping resolve your symptoms.