

Common Headaches: Type, Duration, Frequency and Implications

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SYNOPSIS

Questionnaires completed by 327 preclinical medical and dental students showed that 97.9% had experienced headaches, most frequently attributed to insufficient sleep (38.8%), mental stress (38.8%), alcohol (38.5%), excess heat (36.7%), reading (31.5%), excess noise (29.9%) or light (27.7%), and sleeping too long (23.5%). The frequency and duration of these and other headaches are listed. 8% of the headache group had consulted a doctor. Only 2.1% of all students had never experienced a headache.

Two hypotheses are examined: (1) can headaches be normal?—delineated by their disappearing soon after the noxious stimulus has ceased; (2) can pain in the head, as elsewhere in the body, act as a warning and therefore have protective, even survival value?

Key words: epidemiology, triggers, normal headaches

(*Headache* 30:701-704, 1990)

INTRODUCTION

Headaches are common, affecting more than 80% in various population studies.^{1,2,3} But what precipitates these headaches? How frequent are they, and how long do they last? What proportion of those subject to headaches seek medical advice? Which self-medicaments are taken? And what new ideas arise from answers to these questions? These points were studied.

SUBJECTS AND METHOD

A one page questionnaire was given to preclinical medical or dental students attending routine lectures. No one was interviewed personally and names were not requested. The Ethics Committee of Guy's Hospital Medical and Dental School agreed to the study.

Questionnaires included spaces for age, sex, and whether the subject had ever experienced a headache or not: if yes, whether a doctor had been consulted, and type of medication, if any, taken for headaches. Subjects were requested to indicate the headache frequency (once a day, week, month or year) and duration (minutes, hours or days) for each of the following precipitants, if applicable: hunger,

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Accepted for Publication: October 11, 1990.

menstruation, reading, shopping, mental stress, alcohol, excessive heat, light or noise, travel, eating ice-cream, too much or too little sleep, exercise and cinema; four lines were left for "other causes" for responders to add if they wished.

RESULTS

All students attending routine lectures co-operated although not every question was always answered. Most of the 327 students (198 male, 129 female) were 18 to 21 years old; only 14 were 22 to 32 years of age. 7 (2.1%)—4 male and 3 female—had never experienced a headache.

The triggers and prevalence of headaches in 320 students are listed in Tables 1 and 2, the frequency of headaches and their duration in Tables 3 and 4. The number of individual triggers per students is illustrated in Figure 1.

Overall, headaches were more common in females, with the exception of those triggered by alcohol and

Table 1
Prevalence of Headaches in 327 Medical and Dental Students

Causes of Headache	Male (198)		Female (129)		Total (327)	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
1 Dietary						
Hunger	27	12.9	19	14.9	46	14.1
Alcohol	93	44.3	33	26.0	126	38.5
Ice-Cream	24	11.4	11	8.7	35	10.7
2 Various Activities						
Cinema	8	3.8	9	7.1	17	5.2
Reading	51	24.3	52	40.9	103	31.5
Shopping	19	9.0	23	18.1	42	12.8
Travel	33	15.7	31	24.4	64	19.6
Exercise	17	8.1	10	7.9	27	8.3
3 Sleep						
Excess Sleep	43	20.5	34	26.8	77	23.5
Insufficient Sleep	61	29.0	66	52.0	127	38.8
4 Mental Stress	64	30.5	63	49.6	127	38.8
5 Environmental						
Excess Heat	57	27.1	63	49.6	120	36.7
Excess Light	45	21.4	44	34.6	89	27.2
Excess Noise	46	21.9	52	40.9	98	29.9
Excess Cold	4	1.9	3	2.4	7	2.1
Menstruation	—	—	25	19.4	—	—
Other Causes (See Table 3)	42	20.0	20	15.7	62	19.0
Never Had a Headache	4	1.9	3	2.4	7	2.1