

By Paula Shingler, BSc, MCSP

Apart from the sheer annoyance factor, headaches can be really debilitating. Whilst there are multiple reasons we get these, some originate from problems in the neck which gives referred symptoms to the head leading to headaches. These neck issues are what I'm going to take a look at and hopefully explain how this sort of headache can occur.

Anatomy first!

Firstly let's explain the mechanics. The neck is made up of 7 vertebrae - the top 2 rotate the head and the bottom 5 bend back and forward. In between each of these is a mobile disc - jelly inside with a fibrous outside which helps with shock absorption. Down the centre is the spinal cord with branches of nerves coming out between each of the vertebrae, these then go off to supply the head and also down into the arm. The vertebrae are held together by a mass of ligaments and are supported and moved by muscles. Some of these muscles are attached from the vertebrae to the top of the shoulder and the shoulder blade. Ok, maybe simplistic but you get the general idea.

Muscle tension as a source of headache

Some headaches can be caused by dehydration or fatigue but they can also be caused by muscle tension or poor posture or both.

Muscle tension can also be due to stress. This can be caused by the

challenge of sprinting down that finish chute, or as you fatigue where you tighten up trying hard to shave a few seconds off your time, or are frustrated bumbling round trying to find that last (or maybe first!) control. When your muscles tighten the neck is pulled into a poor position putting pressure on nerves and discs leading to pain or a headache. You can see from the anatomy there are a lot of elements in the neck; it is relatively easy for a tight muscle on one side to pull and cause a disc to bulge and put pressure on a nerve. There is no extra space in there for extra movement! The pain that results can be minor or extreme depending on the degree of pressure or tightness in the muscles.

Very severe pain and loss of sensation (numbness or pins and needles) needs to be dealt with quickly and medical advice should be sought.

Getting rid of that pain

So if you have a bit of a headache what can you do to resolve it? Use gentle neck and shoulder range of movement exercises to break up the tension in the muscles and help them to relax into their normal state. Try shoulder shrugging, pulling your shoulder blades together, chin to chest, looking up, rotating to one side and then the other - do about 10 of each and it should help. Of course if it makes you feel worse STOP!

Prevention better than cure

Maintaining a good posture at all times and maintaining the flexibility in your neck and shoulders really helps. It is a good idea to routinely do the exercises above - especially if you are in a sedentary job and tend to be in a poor posture a lot of the time. My old friend core stability comes into play here too. Strong core musculature will affect the posture of the whole body and will help maintain the head, neck and shoulders in a good headache free position. Feel a headache coming on? Stop, try some shoulder and neck exercises and you might find that headache stops building up.

Get help for persistent headaches

Of course a persistent headache that does not go away does need to be investigated as it can be a symptom of something other than just tension. Also if you have had some trauma - a fall or a bang to the head this should be checked out properly too.

So headaches really are a pain in the neck! Remember your core work and your neck and shoulder exercises if you are a sufferer, for both prevention and recovery. It might not make you run faster but you'll feel better after!

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