

Photo: Dr. Burjor Banaji
Rannoch Moor - Scotland

BECAUSE THERE IS
SO MUCH TO SEE.

Are your eyes to blame?

Headaches are one of the most common ailments of human beings. The multi million dollar sales of over-the counter headache remedies is proof of that. Most people know that a headache is usually not serious, and is often caused by tension. Most people also believe incorrectly that eyestrain and the need for glasses are very common causes of headache. Eye strain and the need for glasses are not major causes of headaches.

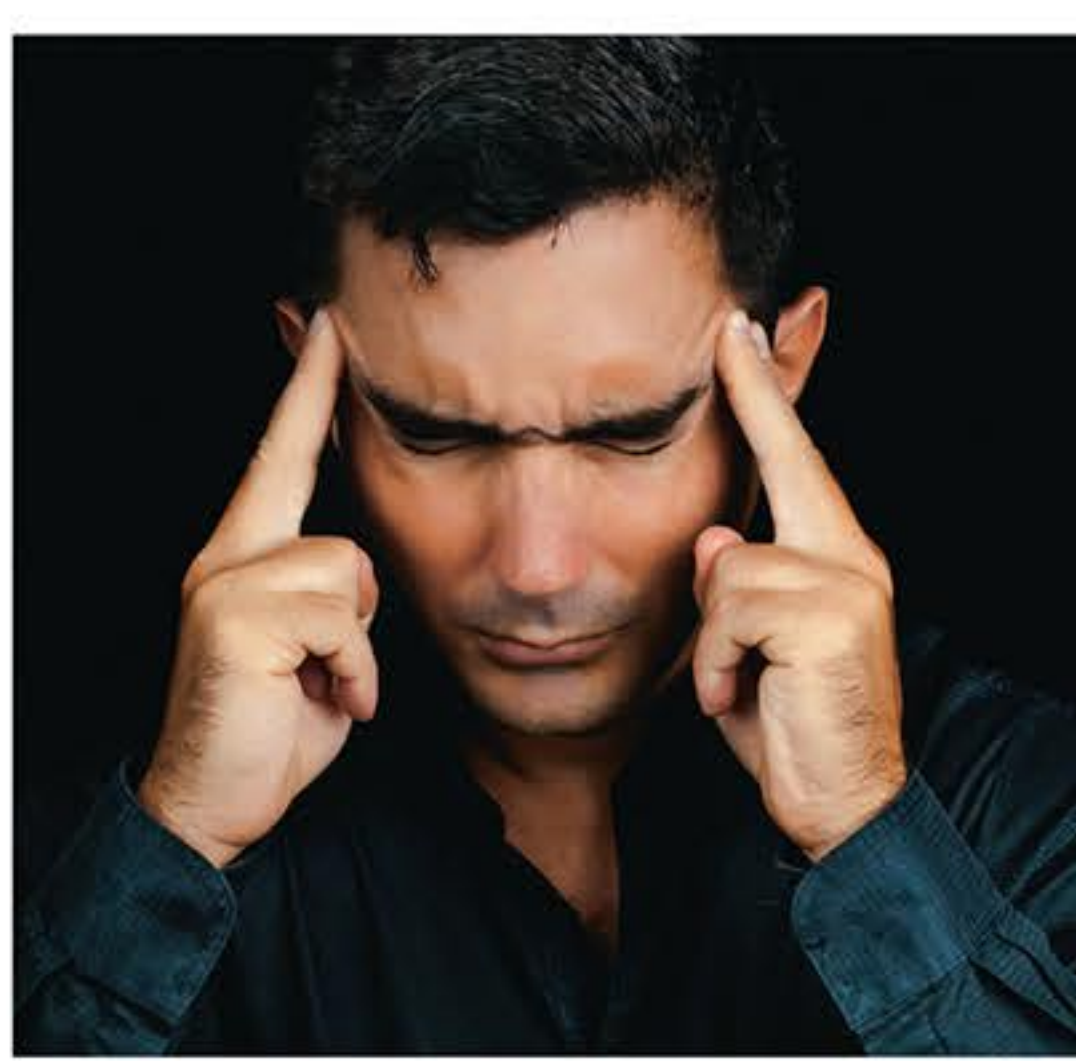
Causes & symptoms

Almost all headaches can be divided into the following groups

1. Muscle contraction
2. Migraine
3. Diseases of the head, eyes, ears, teeth, etc.

Muscle contraction headaches

Muscle contraction headaches are by far the most frequent type. The pain results from the pulling of muscle in the neck and at the base of the head. Commonly, the pain is not felt locally where the muscles are contracting. Instead, it may be “referred” to as felt in areas such as the forehead or the temples or the eye sockets. This can lead to conclusion about the cause of the pain, since the pain is located in the head, or even in the eyes. However, the trouble usually originates in the neck muscle.



Some muscle contraction headaches are longer-lasting and related to emotional feelings of depression. At other times, they may occur because of arthritis in the neck, or a chronic state of high tension or anxiety.

Migraine headaches

Migraine headaches are the next most common cause of headache. This type of headache is caused by stretching of the blood vessel walls in the head. Some people seem to have a tendency to this sort of stretching, while other do not. Migraine headaches run in families and affect about one person in ten. Even young children may have migraine headaches.

Migraine is difficult for patients to understand because it can produce different symptoms in different people. In some, several very brief, severe headaches may occur close together. In others, a visual display of moving jagged lines may be followed by a severe headache. Still others may see the visual display without a headache, and some may

have a severe headache without other symptoms. However, there are some common features of migraine headache. The pain tends not to be continuous, is often more severe on one side of the head, is often accompanied with nausea and vomiting, and is not often associated with serious complication. Migraine may occur with a sudden increase or decrease in stress level. For instance, a person entertaining an unwelcome guest or a hard working executive who begins an overdue vacation may experience a migraine.

Diseases are the least common causes of headache.

Eye disease

Headaches caused by eye disease are usually felt in the eye or in the brow on the side where the disease occur. Frequently these headaches are associated with some other symptoms, such as

Blurred vision.
Haloes around lights.
Extreme sensitivity to light.

Other diseases

Headaches caused by disease of the ear, teeth, jaw joint or facial nerves are usually different than the usual headache pain and discomfort. This difference helps to determine the cause. Headaches may also be caused by high blood pressure. A blood pressure measurement is, therefore, helpful in evaluating any lasting or recurring headache.

Brain tumours

Headache caused by brain tumour or disease is fortunately quite uncommon and the pain may have several unique characteristics. For instance, it may appear quite suddenly or as an increasingly severe pattern over several weeks or months. The intensity of the headache may change depending on body position, sometimes becoming unusually severe when the head is down. It is often associated with other symptoms such as numbness, dizziness, weakness or seizure. Most of all, such headaches tend to become dramatically worse with the passage of time.

Detection, diagnosis & treatment

Because headache is such a common problem, a thorough medical examination is advisable for any chronic or recurring headache. Your family physician can help determine the cause of headache. Because headaches often produce symptoms which suggest that the eyes are at fault, many people feel need to have their eyes examined. Your ophthalmologist is prepared to detect and diagnose an eye or medical disorder, a need for glasses, or other causes of your headache.

The eyes are not usually the cause of headaches, and new glasses are not usually helpful in relieving the symptoms. If eye disease is present, your ophthalmologist will be able to diagnose and treat the problem. If there is an indication of an unusual medical cause of

the headache, further testing or referral to other medical specialist may be advisable. In any event, the importance of a thorough medical eye examination that only the ophthalmologist can provide, is of prime importance in the evaluation of a headache patient.

Headache treatment is naturally determined by its cause. If serious medical disease is found, it needs to be treated medically (or surgically). If depression or anxiety is the cause, referral may be made to the patient's family physician or psychiatrist. If migraine or tension is responsible, accurate diagnosis,

reassurance, and your physician's suggestions for medication, self-help, and assistance are the best solutions.

The eyes and headaches

Your ophthalmologist can be of help in diagnosing the cause of headache, even though headaches are infrequently caused by eye diseases or the need for glasses. The ophthalmologist's medical training can help in the discovery of the proper diagnosis and treatment, and in unusual cases when the need for glasses is the cause of the headaches, the ophthalmologist will prescribe them.