
Headache

We also care for people with secondary headache disorders, which are headaches associated with other conditions such as stroke and head injuries.

If you suffer from regular headaches, you should make an appointment with your GP. You may find it helpful to keep a record of the frequency of your attacks; their symptoms and any trigger factors so that your doctor can identify any patterns. Your GP may carry out other tests, such as checking your eyes and general health, to rule out any underlying conditions before making a diagnosis.

Migraines are severe headaches which usually cause throbbing pains at the front or on one side of the head, and can also have other symptoms such as nausea and sensitivity to light. They are a common type of headache which affects around 15% of adults in the UK. Everyone will experience them differently, with some people having regular attacks and others only having a migraine every few years. If over-the-counter painkillers are not working effectively, your GP suspects you may have a rare form of migraine or your attacks are getting worse or more frequent, you may be referred to our specialist outpatient clinic for further investigations.

Cluster headaches are excruciatingly painful and happen in one side of the head, often behind the eye. They start unexpectedly, and can last between 15 minutes and three hours. They are called cluster headaches because sufferers usually get one to three attacks every day for several weeks or months before they subside for months or even years.

Cluster headaches are rare, and affect around one in every 1,000 people. They are thought to be caused when part of the brain called the hypothalamus increases its activity and releases chemicals, and can also be triggered by alcohol, sudden increases in temperature and taking a medication called inhaled nitroglycerin.

If your GP thinks you are suffering from cluster headaches, you will be referred to the headache clinic at Addenbrooke's Hospital for specialist help. Our consultants will take a detailed history of your symptoms and may refer you for an MRI scan to rule out any other possible conditions. If a diagnosis is confirmed, you may be prescribed a medication called sumatriptan, which narrows your blood vessels so that blood flow to the brain is reduced. Sumatriptan is injected as soon as the headache starts and works within about 10 minutes. You may also be prescribed oxygen therapy and be given an oxygen cylinder to use at home

to help relieve the headaches. In other patients, an occipital nerve anaesthetic block, where local anaesthetic is injected into the back of the head, can relieve cluster headaches for several weeks.

You will be closely monitored by a specialist to make sure that any treatment you are prescribed is effective, in turn helping to minimise the impact of the headaches on your quality of life.