

HEADACHES

Does it ever seem that you get a thumping headache just when you could do without it? Like when you're up late studying for an exam the next day, or trying to do the shopping with a crying child, or rushing to meet that important deadline at work? Do you find yourself thinking that if only you could get rid of the headaches you'd be able to cope much better? Do you worry about your headaches, afraid that they're a sign of something more serious?

Most people get headaches at some stage of their lives. There are, of course, different causes of headaches. The common cold, strained eyesight, and other illness such as meningitis can all have headaches as a symptom. And many people suffer from migraine headaches also. These severe headaches are often accompanied by nausea, sensitivity to light and/or sound. They last from 1 to 3 days and tend to affect men slightly more than women. But these sorts of headaches are relatively rare and affect less than 10 % of the population.

Many more people suffer from a sort of headache that comes from the neck. It will start with a feeling of neck ache or pain. The neck is often stiff and sore on movement. The area of pain will then spread up the back of the head sometimes to the top of the head. It is usually felt just on one side of the head at a time, but episodes can involve the 2 sides at different times. Episodes last from a few hours to up to a day. Often the base of the head and top of the neck are tender to touch. There is usually a pattern to these headaches, such as always coming on after a drive or working at a computer. The headache is usually relieved by rest or by over the counter medication. Most people, when suffering with these headaches will go to their GP first. This is the correct thing to do, and will help to rule out all the other causes of headaches outlined earlier. However, the person who has headaches that originate from the neck will find that painkillers give only temporary relief and that the headaches keep recurring. This is the time to seek advice from your local Chartered Physiotherapist. Not the first person that you'd think of when you have a headache, but exactly the person with the skill, expertise and medical training to get to the root of the problem.

In the case of the 'neck' headache, the problem is two-fold. Firstly, there is often chronic upper neck joint strain and inflammation from poor posture during activities such as working at a computer. These small joints at the top of the neck can send pain to the back and side of the head. Secondly, recent research has shown that, in people with 'neck' headaches, the deep muscles of the neck are working poorly or not at all. This is thought to cause an overuse pattern of the more superficial muscles of the neck. This abnormal pattern of muscle activity is thought to be responsible for strain at the joints of the upper neck, with one group of muscles working too hard, and the other group not working hard enough.

This is where the experts come in. The experienced Chartered Physiotherapist will be able to perform a detailed assessment of the status of your muscle groups, the mobility of the joints of your neck and will analyse your posture. All this information will help him or her to prescribe a carefully tailored and progressive exercise programme to re-educate your muscles. The joints of the neck can be mobilised or manipulated as appropriate, and you will be trained to keep your posture in such a way as not to put undue strain on your joints or muscles. You will then be in charge, not the headaches. Once you have regained control, you can continue to treat yourself and prevent the headaches from coming back.

Make sure, however, that your 'physio' is a Chartered Physiotherapist. There is a world of difference between the medically trained Chartered Physiotherapist and the numerous other 'therapists' and 'ologists' out there who often refer to themselves as 'physios'. Only Chartered Physiotherapists are allowed to treat our Olympic athletes. You deserve to be treated just as well!

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