

# RESOURCES

## Headaches and Dental Health

One in eight Americans suffer from recurring headaches that are so severe they cannot carry out normal living! An estimated 80% of all headaches occur from muscle tension. Did you know that many tension headaches are related to your bite? This article explains how headaches can result from dental stress and how your dentist might treat them.

Headaches are our number one pain problem in the United States. Approximately 40% of all "healthy" individuals suffer from chronic headaches. Head pain is not new. Early civilizations relied on magical potions and spells to cure headaches. In severe cases, holes were drilled in the skulls of headache sufferers so that the evil spirits which were believed to be the cause of the pain could escape. Over the years we have learned much about what causes headaches and how to treat them. Today, there is a growing realization that a common cause of tension headaches is a bad bite.

### Headaches from Dental Stress

How can your bite cause a headache? Tension headaches result from muscle strain, or contraction. When muscles are held tight for long periods of time they begin to ache. Headaches from dental stress are a type of muscle tension headache. A tension headache may be on one or both sides of your head. Or, it may surround your head as if a steel band were wrapped around it. The pain feels like a dull, non-throbbing ache. Tension headaches are usually relieved by aspirin. Specific signs which indicate that the headache may have a dental origin include:

- Pain behind the eyes
- Sore jaw muscles or "tired" muscles upon awakening
- Teeth grinding
- Clicking or popping jaw joints
- Head and/or scalp painful to the touch

### Tired Bite

The muscles which control your jaw and hold your head upright are very complex. Many people do not realize that every time they swallow, their upper and lower teeth must come together in a firm way to brace the jaw against the skull. We swallow over 2000 times each day and night! If your bite is unstable, as from poorly aligned teeth or even a missing tooth, the muscles must work harder to bring the teeth together. Most people take a vacation from work when they tire out-but your jaw muscles never get a break! The overworked muscles become strained. When muscles are under constant strain, they eventually become painful.

## Referred Pain

The pain may be felt in the cheeks or the jaw joints. Many times, however, the pain is "referred" to other areas of the head. Referred pain is when a pain originates in a part of the body that differs from the area where it is felt. Even a single tooth can refer pain to the head.

## Muscle Imbalance

Other muscles may also become involved. Your head is delicately balanced on top of your spinal column by muscles in your jaw, neck, shoulders, and back. Your head weighs approximately 15 pounds the weight of an average bowling ball! Imagine your head as a baseball balanced on top of a pencil by a number of rubber bands. When muscles are tense, they shorten. Now imagine shortening just one of those rubber bands. Some rubber bands would stretch, some would shorten, and the baseball would be thrown off kilter! Similarly, when even a single jaw, neck, or shoulder muscle becomes shortened, all of the other muscles are forced to overwork to keep the head balanced on top of the spinal column. We see then that dental headaches originate from an unstable bite which cause the muscles of the jaw, head, and neck to overwork and become painful. Once the muscles become painful, a vicious cycle begins. The pain makes you feel tense and uptight. This worsens the muscle spasm, which in turn increases the pain.

## Dental Treatment

If you suspect that your headaches might be caused by your bite, contact your dentist. Your dentist will examine your teeth, your muscles, and your jaw joints to determine if dental stress is the source of your headaches. If so, treatment will involve correcting your bite so that the muscles can function without extra strain and tension. In some cases it is helpful to receive other types of treatment, such as physical therapy, along with dental treatment to correct the postural relationship of your head, neck, and shoulders. Counseling or relaxation training might also be helpful

to teach you ways to relax the muscles and to identify sources of emotional stress. However, if the true source of the headache is an unstable bite, this must ultimately be corrected to relieve the headaches.

The important aim of correcting your bite is to insure optimal long-term health. If you have any of the symptoms mentioned, discuss them with your dentist. Your health is your most priceless possession. It is worth the investment!

## When Medical Help is Needed

It is important to realize that headaches have many different causes and a wide range of severity. Immediate medical help should be sought for any head pain that leads to:  
Weakness of an arm or leg  
Loss of vision  
Disorientation  
Loss of consciousness.

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### **AMERICAN ACADEMY OF CRANIOFACIAL PAIN**

11130 Sunrise Valley Drive, Suite 350  
Reston, VA 20191 USA

Main: 703-234-4087

Toll Free: 800-322-8651

Fax: 703-435-4390

Email: [central@aacfp.org](mailto:central@aacfp.org)

International: Main: 0101 (703) 234-4087

Fax: 0101 (703) 435-4390

