

Headaches

Headaches are very common for a lot of people. They can range from mild to severe and can last for short periods or days. There are different types of headache including tension, cluster, migraine and menstrual headaches but what many have in common is the influence that the upper part of the neck and muscles can play on the frequency and severity of the pain.

Many of my patients who receive treatment for neck problems commonly describe headaches as one of their symptoms. For others it may just be the headache without neck pain. Research from an Australian physiotherapist suggests that the upper three levels of the spine and associated muscles commonly influence, and can cause, headaches. Even for migraine sufferers, where the pain can be associated with low levels of a chemical called Serotonin, it is suggested that these levels can be adversely affected by problems in the neck.

What is common to many patients with headaches, on assessment, is that they often have stiffness to the joints of the neck and the small muscles that run from the skull to the neck vertebrae are tight. When these muscles are massaged or stretched they can be very tender and, at times, the person's headache can be reproduced.

Many sufferers of working age will have a sedentary job, often office based with computer use being the main activity. There is a postural component to many headaches as the spine and the muscles are put under a low-grade load for long periods with extended sitting. Older people with degenerative spines can also suffer with headache as the joints tend to stiffen and the muscles tighten.

It is important to assess the quality of neck joint movement and muscle flexibility when treating patients with headache. Any joint stiffness or muscle tension needs to be addressed and this can be done with gentle joint mobilisation, massage techniques and exercises. Attention also needs to be paid to work and postural habits that influence the degree of restriction.

Keeping active and breaking regularly from extended periods of sitting is the best advice and can help to reduce the severity of the headache.