

Name of Disorder: Chronic Tension-Type Headaches
Essay Title: Understanding Chronic Tension-Type Headache

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What is chronic tension-type headache?

Chronic tension-type headache (CTTH) is a serious condition, causing greatly decreased quality of life and high disability. Chronic TTH evolve over time from episodic TTH. The following definition of a chronic tension type headache has been provided by the International Headache Society:

“daily or very frequent episodes of headache, typically bilateral, pressing or tightening in quality and of mild to moderate intensity, lasting hours to days, or unremitting. The pain does not worsen with routine physical activity, but may be associated with mild nausea, photophobia or phonophobia.”^[1], pg. 661.

In addition, CTTH sufferers report headaches on more than 15 days each month.

How common is chronic tension-type headache?

Tension-type headache is the second most prevalent health condition in the world (after dental caries)^[2], and approximately 3-5% of the population is thought to suffer from CTTH. That is, approximately 1 million Australians are likely to suffer from CTTH.

Health issues related to chronic tension-type headache

Psychosocial distress is commonly reported by individuals who experience CTTH. CTTH is commonly associated with anxiety and depression^[3, 4], but the causal direction of these relationships are unclear. The literature regarding the relationships between CTTH headache and physical activity and fitness is limited but, low physical activity levels have been associated with a higher prevalence of CTTH, and a trend to lower physical activity with increasing frequency of headaches^[5].

What causes chronic tension-type headache?

Currently, the mechanism behind both episodic and chronic TTH remains unclear. Episodic TTH is thought to be primarily driven by activity in peripheral nociceptors (nerves that carry ‘danger’ messages from the tissues of the body). Whereas, CTTH is thought to be primarily driven by sensitivity of cortical (brain) nociceptive networks that sub serve pain. In simple terms, whereas episodic TTH is thought to reflect danger in the tissues around the head and neck, CTTH is not^[6].

How can chronic tension-type headache be treated?

Research suggests that CTTH headache is difficult to treat successfully, and as such prevention of TTH becoming chronic is paramount. Medical management of CTTH, usually involving medications such as antidepressants, and non-medical management strategies such as relaxation, acupuncture and massage, have shown mixed results and usually only short term relief^[6]. Further research into new potential treatments is urgently required.

References

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