

THE BODY NEVER FORGETS AN INJURY AND, COUPLED WITH POOR POSTURE AND LIFESTYLE HABITS, EACH TRAUMA, LARGE OR SMALL, CAN CAUSE TIGHTENING IN THE MUSCLES OR STIFFNESS IN THE JOINTS IN ALL PARTS OF THE BODY – PARTICULARLY, IN THE CASE OF HEADACHES, IN OUR NECK, UPPER BACK AND SHOULDERS.

GOT A HEADACHE?

THAT PAIN MAY BE COMING FROM YOUR NECK

Headaches that originate from the neck are very common. Many physiotherapists are seeing an increasing number of people suffering from cervicogenic headaches (headaches generated in the neck).

This pain is not only debilitating in itself, but it leads to many lost hours of work, and takes a toll on our personal lives, affecting recreational activities and time spent with friends and family.

Unfortunately, given the modern trend toward sedentary work and repetitive activities, many Manitobans are presently suffering or are at risk of developing cervicogenic headaches.

In the new age of electronics and cellphones, we don't realize the very poor posture that our necks/ heads are in for much of our day. But over time, cradling a telephone receiver or looking down at our electronic devices takes a toll.

Did you know: The weight of the head in good posture is about 16-18 pounds. In poor posture, the structures of the neck may be forced to support 20-30 more pounds.

Most people are surprised when they realize how poor their posture is when they're talking on the phone or using a digital device. Ask a friend to take a photo and you'll get the picture.

As we go through life, the flexibility we were born with gradually diminishes. We marvel as we watch babies put their toes into their mouths. With time, however, compounded by injuries (from major to relatively minor), poor sleeping positions, bad posture and sedentary tendencies, we slowly lose our flexibility. The body never forgets an injury and, coupled with poor posture and lifestyle habits, each trauma, large or small, can cause tightening in the muscles or stiffness in the joints in all parts of the body — particularly, in the case of headaches, in our neck, upper back and shoulders.

When we wake up in the morning and look at ourselves in the mirror, we think we look the same as we did the day before, but each day we are slowly changing. It is the same with movement. Much like our weight, strength and fitness, our mobility changes, and for most of us it is gradually reduced.

Headaches often develop over time, as our bodies lose the ability for other areas to compensate. As physiotherapists, say, "We exhaust our adaptive potential." This means our tissues lose the ability to withstand and tolerate abnormal and excessive loading patterns and at some point they tell us, in a painful way, that something needs to change. The muscles, joints and tissues in our necks have the ability to refer

pain up into our heads, which is why, if we stress the neck, we risk bringing on headaches.

Physiotherapists are movement specialists who are able to determine if your headache is coming from the neck. We take a detailed history and ask you specific questions. We observe your posture and movement and take you through a detailed exam to help us focus on dysfunctional areas. We want to know where the headache originates but also identify the issues causing the excessive load on painful tissues.

For instance, if you wake up with a headache, it may be related to joint stiffness, a poor pillow or a contorted sleeping position. A physiotherapist will help you with corrective solutions for sleeping positions but may also be able to work that joint free.

If your headache develops as the day goes on, it may be due to tight muscles that grow increasingly tighter from trying to hold the weight of your head in work-related postures or from looking at your electronic device. We tend to work in a head-forward posture, which puts an enormous strain and demand on the discs, muscles and joints of the neck and shoulder. Pain receptors are stimulated and the muscles at the base of the skull tighten up, causing headaches.

Physiotherapists can help with ergonomic suggestions and give you strategies to improve your posture. They can teach you soft tissue release techniques for tight muscles, and strengthening exercises for weak or lengthened muscles.

If your neck is stiff or sore, and you have headache, then you probably have a cervicogenic headache. While reaching for a bottle of ibuprofen may provide temporary relief, please remember that a physiotherapist can help you discover why you have a headache in the first place, and work with you to relieve some of the causative factors.

Murray MacHutchon is a physiotherapist at Pembina Physiotherapy & Sports Injury Clinic. You can find Murray and other great physiotherapists in the Find A Physiotherapist section at www.mbphysio.org.



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