Understanding headache

Patient education guide | Canadian-first draft

Version	1.0	Publication date	20 November 2026
Last clinically reviewed	20 November 2026	Clinical reviewer	Dr. Eduardo Jacques
Privacy	No PHI fields, uploads or storage	Status	Clinically reviewed for publication

General health information only. This guide does not diagnose a condition or replace an assessment by a qualified clinician.

Headache is a symptom, not a diagnosis. Many headaches are primary patterns such as migraine or tension-type headache. A secondary headache is caused by another condition, so the timing, examination and warning features matter.

Common patterns

- Migraine may include moderate or severe pain, nausea, sensitivity to light or sound, and sometimes reversible visual, sensory or speech symptoms called aura.
- Tension-type headache may feel like pressure or tightening and may be linked with neck or muscle discomfort.
- Medication-overuse headache can occur when acute headache medicines are used frequently. A clinician can help review frequency and a safe plan.
- Other causes can include infection, eye problems, injury, sleep disruption, hormonal change, substance use or other medical conditions.

Symptoms are not the same as a diagnosis

A symptom list helps describe the experience. Diagnosis is a clinical process that combines the story, examination, pattern over time and any targeted testing. A diary can organize information, but it cannot identify the cause by itself.

How an assessment may work

- Describe the first headache, the worst headache, the usual headache and any change between them.
- Review timing, location, quality, duration, frequency, triggers, associated symptoms and effect on daily activities.
- Review medicines, supplements, caffeine, alcohol or other substances, sleep, meals, mood and pregnancy or postpartum timing when relevant.
- Have vital signs and a focused neurologic, eye, neck and general examination.
- Discuss whether testing, imaging, treatment classes, referral or follow-up would change care.

Urgent warning signs

- Sudden, extremely severe headache that peaks quickly.
- New weakness, numbness, facial droop, trouble speaking, walking, balancing, remembering or staying awake.
- Fever with stiff neck, rash, confusion or marked light sensitivity.
- Headache after significant head injury or with repeated vomiting.

- New or changing headache during pregnancy or after birth, especially with vision changes or other concerning symptoms.
- New loss of vision, double vision, a painful red eye or other acute eye symptoms.
- A substantial change in a previously stable pattern or a progressively worsening headache.

If a red flag is present, seek urgent or emergency assessment. This list cannot determine what is happening for an individual.

Sources opened and checked 20 November 2026

IHE / TOP Canadian headache guideline: https://www.ihe.ca/public/uploaded/headache-guideline.pdf

Choosing Wisely Canada headache recommendations: https://choosingwiselycanada.org/recommendation/headache/

Migraine Canada discussion guide: https://migrainecanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Patient-version-Discussion-Guide_English_Extended_Final_Copy-Digital.pdf

Migraine Canada headache diary: https://migrainecanada.org/how-to-use-a-migraine-diary/

London Health Sciences Centre headache clinic: https://www.lhsc.on.ca/clinical-neurological-sciences/john-h-kreeft-headache-clinic

HealthLink BC migraine headaches: https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthwise/migraine-headaches-0

Canadian Paediatric Society acute migraine: https://cps.ca/en/documents/position/acute-migraine

Ontario OHIP coverage: https://www.ontario.ca/page/what-ohip-covers

Ontario medication coverage: https://www.ontario.ca/page/medication-coverage-results

Ontario Health811: https://www.ontario.ca/page/your-health

AAN / American Headache Society 2026 update: https://www.aan.com/PressRoom/Home/PressRelease/5361

American Headache Society diagnosis overview: https://americanheadachesociety.org/research/library/overview-of-migraine-diagnosis

NICE CG150: https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg150

NHS headaches: https://www.nhs.uk/symptoms/headaches/

International Headache Society ICHD-3: https://ihs-headache.org/en/resources/ichd/