



## Brain Tumors and Headaches

### What is a headache?

A headache is a painful feeling in any part of your head. The pain can range from mild to severe and can be a throbbing, sharp, or dull pain. Headaches can come with other symptoms such as light sensitivity, nausea, or vomiting.

### Why does my brain tumor cause headaches?

Headaches are common in people with brain tumors. The brain itself cannot feel pain. A brain tumor causes a headache by putting pressure on nerves and blood vessels in the brain that can sense pain. This can be caused by:

- A growing tumor.
- Swelling around the tumor.
- A buildup of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) in the brain.

Brain tumor treatments can also cause headaches. These include [radiation therapy](#), [chemotherapy](#), and [surgery \(craniotomy\)](#).

### What does a headache caused by my brain tumor feel like?

The symptoms of a headache caused by a brain tumor can differ from person to person.

- It often affects both sides of the head, but in some cases, the pain may only be on the side of your tumor.
- These headaches tend to get worse or happen more often over time. The pain may be consistent or steady and may not get better after taking pain relievers (like Aspirin, Tylenol, or Advil).
- They may be worse when you first get up and get a little better after you have been up. They may be worse when you cough, exercise, or change position.
- These headaches may wake you up at night.
- They may come with other symptoms such as vomiting, light sensitivity, and/or new or worsening neurologic symptoms.
- People who had problems with headaches before their brain tumor are more likely to have headaches related to their brain tumor.

### What can trigger headaches related to my brain tumor?

Some things that can trigger headaches are:

- Things in your diet like caffeine, alcohol, chocolate, aspartame, MSG, and nitrates.
- Skipping meals.
- Hormone changes during menstruation or ovulation in women.

- Strong stimulants around you, like bright or flashing lights, odors, or loud noises.
- Times of stress.
- Changes in weather, altitude, seasons, and sleep patterns.
- Not getting enough sleep.
- Smoking cigarettes.

## How can I treat my headaches?

Some things can help manage or treat your headache pain that is caused by your brain tumor, such as:

- Talking to your provider about medications you can take to manage or treat your headaches. Take these medications as you are told.
- Medications such as analgesics (acetaminophen, ibuprofen) and narcotics (oxycodone) can help with the pain. Steroids can reduce swelling in the brain (dexamethasone, methylprednisolone).
- Keeping a log of information to share with your provider. This should include:
  - When and where the headache occurs. What are you doing when it occurs?
  - How does the pain feel (sharp, dull, etc.)? Rate the pain on a scale of 1 to 10.
  - Do you have any other symptoms (nausea, light sensitivity, neurologic symptoms, etc.)?
  - If you take pain medication, rate the pain again 30 minutes after taking the medication.
  - Is there anything that makes the pain better or worse?
- Look at the log with your provider so they can make changes to your medications to manage and treat your symptoms.

## When do I need to call my provider?

Headaches are very common if you have a brain tumor, but there are times when you should call your provider. These include:

- A headache that is getting worse over time.
- A headache that comes with a fever, neck pain, or other symptoms of infection or illness.
- A headache along with new neurologic symptoms like vision or speech changes, drowsiness, changes in your ability to walk, or seizures.

If you have any questions about your new or worsening headaches or a headache that has changed, call your provider.

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