

Say Goodbye to That Throbbing Headache

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The legal profession is infamous for its long, stressful hours and immense workload. Personally speaking as a young practising lawyer, I am intimately acquainted with the rigours of Law, including the maintenance of personal health and managing the minor illnesses that can surface from time to time.

Of all the debilitations that I have experienced, the classic headache is the one that I find most tiresome – that sensation of throbbing pain powerful enough to ruin an otherwise productive day. I am unfortunately no stranger to those, and I consider myself lucky if I only experience an episode once a month.

In my attempts to understand and control this problem, I have compiled some information about headaches that I am happy to share in this article.

Headache Symptoms

There are three distinct types of headaches as recognised by SingHealth: Migraines, Tension Headaches and Cluster Headaches.¹ I personally do not have any experience with Cluster Headaches, so I will only be concentrating on the first two types for this article.

Migraine: In my opinion, the migraine is the worst of the three headache types. Individuals suffering from migraine will commonly experience the following:

1. Dull throbbing sensations, ranging from moderate to severe pain;
2. Negatively affected by light, sound or smell; and
3. Nausea or vomiting.

Tension Headache: Not as devastating as migraine but just as troublesome, tension headaches are very common and are easy to identify and anticipate. The symptoms include:

1. Steady, tight pain usually found at the temples of the forehead or neck region.

Unlike migraine, tension headaches do not cause nausea, nor do they exhibit a throbbing sensation during an episode.

Causes of Headaches

Many factors exist that can induce a headache.

Environmental stimulation such as bright lights, loud noises or overpowering smells can overload the sensory organs and add more stress to the brain, which consequently cause headaches. Sudden changes in weather and unusual environmental conditions like the haze can also be major sources of over-stimulation.²

Stress in all its forms is a major catalyst for headaches. These can range from intense emotions, mental stress from work or personal issues, and physical stress.³

Ingesting certain types of **food and drink** can also contribute to the onset of headaches, oily food and sugary drinks in particular.⁴

Lastly, **bad body posture** causes undue stress on the spine, neck and shoulders, which in turn increases the likelihood of headaches.⁵

Treatments for Headaches

Like any other ailment, there are two types of treatment options for headaches: **Symptomatic Treatments** and **Preventive Treatments**. The former focuses on resolving and relieving the symptoms caused by headaches (pain, nausea), while the latter is geared towards staving off any possible chance of a headache occurring in the near future.⁶

Symptomatic Treatments: Migraine

Migraine sufferers commonly find themselves trapped in a permanent state of agony, stemming from over-stimulation from external sources, among other things.

1. To recover from migraine, wearing loose clothing is a must whenever possible. The sensation of cloth constricting the skin can become another source of stress for the brain to process, which translates to an increased intensity of the headache.
2. As migraine is a product of sensory overload, it is best for the individual to isolate themselves in a dark, quiet

environment to speed up recovery. Usually, this means staying in bed with the curtains shut.

Symptomatic Treatments: Tension Headaches

Tension headaches share some similarities with migraine in terms of symptoms, but possess different triggers. A sufferer of tension headaches can usually tell when one is approaching because of two things: tiredness and stiff muscles on the back, shoulders and neck.

1. One of the easiest ways to stave off a tension headache is to relieve the soreness on the shoulders and neck, through the use of stretching. Stretching exercises formulated for the office environment are particularly well known for this purpose and can be found anywhere,

but the resource from SingHealth⁷ comes especially recommended.

2. A hot shower is another quick and easy method to address the tension headache, as your muscles are given the opportunity to relax while doing so.

Preventive Treatments

Based on my own experiences and from conversations with peers, it is clear that migraine and tension headaches are not only a common occurrence, but are also mitigatable to a certain extent. I personally believe that prevention is ultimately better than cure, which is why I am providing several more tips on preventive treatments.

Tips for Office Ergonomics

Keep your shoulders relaxed when using the keyboard or mouse

Sit on the chair with your lower back fully supported by the backrest

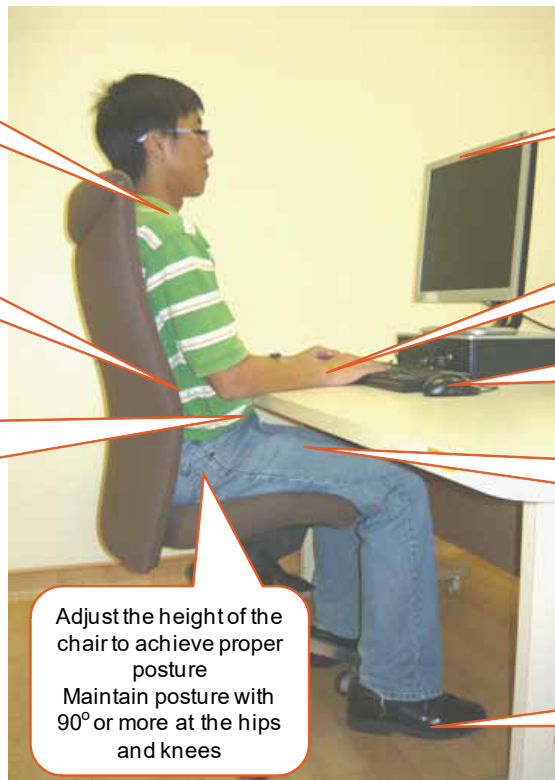
Armrests (if available) should be adjustable in height or removable. They should not hinder you from moving close to the desk

Give your eyes a break by looking at a distant object regularly

Interrupt long periods of sitting at regular intervals

Alternate between tasks that use different muscle groups

Perform stretching exercises regularly



Have the top of the screen at or slightly below your eye level

Your wrist should be relaxed and straighten when typing or using the mouse

The mouse should be placed at the same level as the keyboard

Allow sufficient clearance to move your knees and legs under the desk or keyboard tray

Both your feet should be rested on the floor or on the footrest

Adjust the height of the chair to achieve proper posture
Maintain posture with 90° or more at the hips and knees

1. **Practice good body posture and adhere to good office ergonomics.** It is very easy to give in to a hard day of work and let your body slouch as you work on your computer at a terrible position and height relative to your desk, but it is time for a change. The ergonomics of the office workspace is often an underrated importance; a good posture and desk setup can and will do wonders for your body, and decrease the chances of getting a headache while at work.

Resources for adjusting your workspace to suit your requirements are commonplace, but I suggest starting with the Singhealth⁹ article on Office Ergonomics and progressing from there.

2. **Perform gentle stretching exercises.** At least half of a lawyer's time at work is spent hunched over a computer drafting the next affidavit, letter to a learned friend or e-mails to a client. Time passes quickly for those of us focused on our work, so much so that a few hours

can pass while we maintain the same sitting posture throughout.

Once, I visited my family doctor and told him about my recurring symptoms of a throbbing headache. Apart from prescribing me muscle relaxants and urging me to take a day off and rest at home, he advised me of the benefits of doing stretching exercises in between work. The theory is sound; migraine and tension headaches are usually caused by knotted muscles, which strain the nerves and obstruct blood flow in the body. Therefore, if one is able to relax those muscles as often as possible, the frequency of headaches would of course decrease.

Similar to the symptomatic treatment idea provided for tension headaches above, one can also use the same techniques⁹ for preventive use. However, I recommend getting up from your seat and performing these exercises at least once an hour.

Office Stretching Exercises

Stretching should be performed slowly without bouncing or jerking. As you stretch, the tension should begin to ease. After this, you gently begin to increase the stretch.



- Hold on the base of the chair
- Bring ear to shoulder until you feel a slight tension
- Hold till tension begins to lessen and gradually increase the stretch
- Hold for 10 seconds
- Repeat on other side
- Turn your head to the right and look downwards
- Hold for 5 seconds, increasing the stretch slowly
- Hold for 5 seconds
- Repeat on other side
- Interlock fingers and turn palms upwards
- Straighten arms and stretch upwards
- Expand chest by compressing both shoulder blades together backwards
- Hold for 10 seconds
- Interlock fingers and push hands forward with palms facing outwards
- Feel the stretch between the shoulder blades
- Hold for 10 seconds
- Sit upright, tummy in
- Rotate body, bringing arms across
- Keep position for 5 seconds till you feel a gentle stretch in the spine
- Repeat on other side

The image above, provided by the Occupational Therapy Department, Singapore General Hospital, is reproduced with permission from SingHealth's HealthXChange, Singapore's first interactive health and lifestyle resource portal. For more information, visit www.healthxchange.com.sg

3. **Massage therapy can work wonders.** A good deep-tissue massage can be more beneficial than a simple stretch, simply because your muscles are able to relax themselves much better. Any type of massage is sure to be of help, but here's a tip: if you are facing an especially tough day with little to no downtime, a quick 15-minute massage could be all you need to give yourself a boost to push onwards.

Establishments offering massage services are plentiful, but I know for a fact that there are plenty to be found in the Raffles Place and Chinatown areas. Prices may also vary depending on the duration of the massage, but can fall anywhere between \$10 (for 10 minutes) and just slightly over \$100 (for 1.5 hours if you have the luxury of time to spare, lucky you!).

As a side note, some places also provide facilities for power naps to go with your massage; an excellent way to refresh and recharge yourself!

4. **Avoid your triggers.** If migraine and tension headaches are a common occurrence, perhaps it is time to think about what is causing them and consider removing them from your life.

For some, it could be direct and prolonged exposure to sunlight, or a greasy plate of *char kway teow* that gives them a splitting headache afterwards. Simply avoid these "triggers", and you will be free of the complications. This could mean sacrificing something you love of course, but if it means getting rid of the headaches, it might not sound like a bad idea.

5. **Hydrate yourself often.** It is easy to neglect the simple act of drinking water, but with our busy schedules, dehydration happens more often than not. For someone who suffers from constant headaches, however, the benefits of drinking water regularly are immense.¹⁰

But why drink water in the first place? It is a common fact that headaches can usually manifest when dehydration occurs, whether that person is prone to headaches in the first place or not. Don't forget to bring along a bottle of water with you wherever you go. Drink up, and drink often.

6. **Maintain proper working hours.** During the course of my career in the legal profession, I have experimented with various working methods: the work-until-dawn crunch, the short-sharp-bursts method included, among others.

I currently prefer to come to work early in the morning, and try to leave the office before 8pm. So far, this method has been productive as there are no phone calls to take in the morning that will intermittently affect my train of thought, thus allowing me to clear my work efficiently. So, I do not see myself changing my working style again anytime soon. I realise that this piece of advice is lifestyle-oriented and may not be suitable for everyone. Some of my peers still prefer to come in to work at 9am, work till about 6pm and go for "happy hour" or the gym before resuming work at the office till the wee hours. Others on the other hand, prefer to bring work home to do and often find themselves having difficulty waking up on time for work the next day. Based on personal experience, the constant start/stop routine has only succeeded in messing up my internal schedule, sometimes causing sleepless nights and, of course, migraine. On the other hand, I find it much easier to chip away at a task for an extended period before taking the rest of the day off. Since the switch, my headaches have also reduced somewhat. So, try it, go for a change!

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Notes

- 1 <<https://www.singhealth.com.sg/PatientCare/ConditionsAndTreatments/Pages/Headaches.aspx>>.
- 2 <<http://www.healthxchange.com.sg/healthyliving/SpecialFocus/Pages/Headache-and-Migraine-Know-the-Difference.aspx>>.
- 3 <<http://www.healthxchange.com.sg/healthyliving/SpecialFocus/Pages/Headache-and-Migraine-Know-the-Difference.aspx>>.
- 4 <<http://www.orthopaedics.com.sg/consequences-of-having-a-poor-sitting-posture>>.
- 5 <<http://www.ezyhealth.com/magazine/dealing-with-migraines/>>.
- 6 <<https://www.singhealth.com.sg/PatientCare/ConditionsAndTreatments/Pages/Office-Ergonomics.aspx>>.
- 7 <<http://www.healthxchange.com.sg/healthyliving/HealthatWork/Pages/Musculoskeletal-Disorders-Body-Aches-and-Pains-Common-in-Office-Workers.aspx>>.
- 8 <<https://www.singhealth.com.sg/PatientCare/ConditionsAndTreatments/Pages/Office-Ergonomics.aspx>>.
- 9 <<http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/nagging-headache-not-going-away>>.