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## **Headaches And What They Mean**

**By: Dr. Stephen O'Neil**

All too often I hear people say, "Well yes, I have a headache, but it's just my normal headache". There is no such thing as "normal headaches", in fact there is no such thing as "normal pain". Pain of any kind is the body's way of telling us that something is wrong. Millions of people in North America alone suffer from headaches on a regular basis. These headaches cost employers millions of dollars in lost wages each year. Headaches are also at the top of the list of complaints, for visits to the family doctor or chiropractor.

Headaches are a highly studied problem with volumes of information available in relation to patterns, causes, symptoms and duration. However, the treatment and control of headaches for some people remains a mystery. Most medical treatments rely on over the counter prescription pain medications to control the symptoms of headaches. These however, do very little to address the underlying cause of these symptoms.

It is important to note that headaches come in several forms including classic migraine, common migraine, cluster, tension, sinus and cervicogenic, to name a few. Each has its own set of signs, symptoms and patterns. Headaches can be caused by pain sensitive structures inside the head (intracranial) or outside the head (extracranial). The vast majority is caused by extracranial structures and this can be confirmed by a series of tests to rule out more serious causes. Extracranial pain sensitive causes for headache can include irritation to spinal nerves in the neck, tight muscles of the head and neck, TMJ (jaw problems), earaches, dehydration, or eye problems.

Many of the causes of headaches can be treated conservatively by your chiropractor. A complete chiropractic exam and evaluation can determine what type of headache, the likely cause of the headache and the best treatment available. When evaluating for headaches, it is very important to note patterns such as time of day your headache occurs and how it relates to your sleeping and eating habits. Your diet can be an important clue to the cause. Hormonal patterns can help with an accurate diagnosis, as can your daily stressors, especially your posture at work or while sleeping. Knowing the underlying cause of the problem and how to deal with it is the first step in finding relief. From that point, further referral or investigation may be required, or treatment may begin.

Chiropractic treatment of headaches generally focuses on the spinal nerves of the cervical spine (neck), the muscles of the neck and head area and the way these interact with one another. Postural and biomechanical changes of the neck and changes in the surrounding musculature play at least a partial role in almost every type of headache. Chiropractic adjustments relieve pressure on spinal nerves, along with soft tissue techniques they can often correct underlying problems. Relaxing muscles, decreasing trigger points and increasing blood flow relieve associated symptoms.

Many people suffer monthly, weekly or even daily with debilitating headaches with little or no relief for no reason at all. Through correlation of symptoms, symptom patterns, history and physical findings, an accurate diagnosis can be achieved and an appropriate treatment plan set into motion. Chiropractic adjustments along with some lifestyle changes such as diet, posture and exercise may be all that is needed to eliminate this so called "normal pain".