

# Diabetes and Headaches: 12 Safe and Effective Relief Tips You Need to Know

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Headaches are a widespread health concern for millions of people. They can seriously impact your quality of life and interfere with your daily activities. Headache disorders are among the most common causes of lost productivity at work.

If you live with diabetes, headaches can sneak up on you more often than you'd like. While headaches are common for everyone, they can signal a blood sugar imbalance in diabetics.

On a positive note, many headaches can easily be managed at home. Having some practical tools in your arsenal to help with headache relief while keeping your blood sugar levels in mind can help you effectively manage your headaches as soon as they occur.

# Types of Headaches

Headaches can be categorized in a couple of different ways. In a broad sense, we have Primary vs Secondary types of headaches.

Primary Headaches are headaches that have no known cause. This type of headache is not a symptom of another disease or condition. These are the types of headaches that can generally be treated over the counter.

## Primary Headaches

Tension headaches, affecting about 80% of the population, are the most common type of headache. With this type of headache, people usually have mild to moderate pain on both sides of the head and the pain has a pressing or tightening quality to it.

Migraines typically cause moderate to severe pain on just one side of your head. Some people also experience sensitivity to light and sound as well as nausea and weakness.

Cluster headaches usually come on in clusters before temporarily going away. They only affect about 0.1% of the population, so they're not common. They occur on one side of your head and are more localized, such as around your eye. The pain from this type of headache may be very severe.

Sinus headaches may feel like you have an infection in your sinuses. This can include some throbbing in your head, accompanied by pressure around your eyes, cheeks, and forehead.

## Secondary Headaches

Secondary headaches are caused by an underlying disease or condition, such as diabetes.

# Unique Challenges for Diabetes Patients

Patients with diabetes may experience both primary and secondary types of headaches.

Headaches can be painful and they may be very disruptive to your life. For people living with diabetes, these are the top most useful tips for headache relief.

## 1. Check Your Blood Sugar First

Headaches are possible with both low and high blood sugar levels. Therefore, it's important to first monitor your blood glucose levels to determine if your headache is related to blood sugar fluctuations.

If your blood glucose levels are either high or low, be sure to get your blood sugar levels under control first.

## 2. Get Hydrated

Dehydration is a common headache trigger. Try to stay well-hydrated throughout the day to help prevent the onset of a headache in the first place. Also, even mild dehydration may worsen an existing headache.

Research suggests that drinking more fluids reduces the severity, duration, and frequency of headaches. A dehydration based headache may be relieved within minutes of consuming fluids.

The required water intake may vary from person to person. However, generally speaking, most people need at least about 6 cups of water a day. Water keeps every system in your body working properly. Consult with your doctor to see what amount of water is right for you.

Keep your blood sugar in mind. Avoid sugary drinks. Instead, opt for water or sugar-free electrolyte drinks, unless your doctor has provided you with any kind of fluid or electrolyte restrictions.

Stay away from fluids that may dehydrate you. This includes things such as excessive amounts of alcohol and coffee.

When you feel a headache coming on, check to see if you may be dehydrated and reach for a glass of water. Drinking water can also have a soothing effect on our bodies, which can be very relaxing in the middle of a headache.

### 3. Eat Regular, Balanced Meals

Eat nutritious, well-balanced meals and try to be consistent with your eating schedule daily. Skipping meals can cause blood sugar dips, triggering headaches.

### 4. Manage Stress

Stress is probably the best-known culprit of headaches. It's a common trigger for tension and other types of headaches.

It's easy to get caught up in the daily grind of life. While we're not able to control events outside of ourselves, we can control how we respond to them.

Take stock of what triggers you and how you respond to those triggers. Are you tensing your muscles and grinding your teeth? These and other reactions may worsen or bring on headaches.

While daily annoyances and other stressors will always be there, taking action to keep stress under control can help prevent and manage headaches.

Incorporate some stress management into your daily routine. This can include things such as:

- Meditation
- Gentle stretching
- Yoga
- Deep Breathing Exercises

Also, try simplifying your life as much as possible. Stay focused on only what's important and impactful in your life without allowing yourself to get overwhelmed.

Exercise reduces cortisol, the primary stress hormone, which can spike blood glucose levels. It also stimulates the production of endorphins, which are the body's natural painkillers and mood elevators.

## 5. Use Cold or Warm Compresses

You may get relief from a headache using cold or warm compresses.

Cold compresses can help to dull the pain, thereby providing relief.

Warm compresses can help relax tense muscles, which can be very calming and soothing. You can also take a warm shower or bath to soothe a headache for a similar effect.

## 6. Get Rested, But Avoid Oversleeping

Sleep and headaches share many elements of anatomy and physiology in our body, and they overlap clinically. They have a very interdependent relationship. So much so, that it's important to take a closer look at how well you sleep at night if you have headaches.

Sleep is often a trigger for headaches. Good quality sleep plays an important role in allowing your brain and body to recharge.

While both lack of sleep and too much sleep can bring on a headache, lack of sleep is more common among people suffering from chronic headaches.

It's important to prioritize and be very intentional about your sleep. While it may vary from one person to another, most experts recommend adults get about 7 to 9 hours of sleep at night.

If you're in the middle of a headache, taking a quick nap (about 15 to 20 minutes) may just be what you need to find some much-needed relief.

## 7. Manage Environmental and Sensory Triggers

Avoid environmental and sensory headache triggers. Especially the ones that you know you are particularly sensitive to.

This may include things such as strong smells from perfumes, cigarettes, or other chemicals. Overstimulation from bright lights and noise like flickering TV screens set at a high volume can also be quick to bring on a headache.

Sudden shifts in temperature or weather may also trigger headaches. Take protective measures to help ensure you are adequately clothed and protected before going outside.

If something in your environment seems to be triggering your headache, try removing yourself from that trigger as much as possible to help with headache relief.

## 8. Track Headache Patterns With Blood Sugar

If you regularly get headaches, keep a log of when you get them. It's important to analyze this information alongside your blood sugar log to see if there may be a blood sugar related pattern.

## 9. Manage Your Current Medications and Chemical Triggers

Headache is one of the most common side effects of many medications. If you are taking medications, including over-the-counter products, consult with your pharmacist or doctor to see if any of your medications may be the culprit.

Oftentimes, medication-related headaches can be easily managed simply by adjusting how you take that medicine. For example, some medication-related headaches can be relieved simply by eating. Other times, simple dose adjustments may help.

Also, check to make sure that you're taking your medications as prescribed by your doctor or following the instructions on the labels for over-the-counter products. Speak with your doctor or pharmacist to make sure that you're taking your medications correctly.

If you're experiencing headaches while on medications, ask about how they may be better managed while on those particular medications.

Also, take note of chemicals that you may be sensitive to. Artificial sweeteners or MSG are known to trigger headaches for some people. Keep a symptom journal to help you identify any patterns.

## 10. Try Caffeine in Moderation

Caffeine can be a little tricky because it can be both a trigger and a treatment for headaches. However, if you haven't had a lot of caffeine and you find that you are having a headache, a small amount of caffeine may be just what you need to find some relief.

Steer away from sugary energy drinks or sodas, though. Instead, try unsweetened coffee or tea.

## 11. Use Diabetes-friendly Pain Relief

Over-the-counter products can provide effective relief from headaches. Thankfully, most mild to moderate headaches can be easily managed with over-the-counter products.

It's important to note that over-the-counter products can pose a significant risk to your health, especially if not used properly. Some may affect your blood sugar levels or interact with your diabetes medications or other health conditions commonly associated with diabetes. So be sure to consult with your doctor or Pharmacist to see what's right

for you. Use over-the-counter products as per the package label instructions only unless advised differently by your doctor.

Also, be sure not to overuse over-the-counter products. In general, they should not be used regularly for more than a week without consulting further with your doctor.

In general, Acetaminophen (Tylenol) is the safest medication for most diabetic patients to take for headache relief.

While over-the-counter medications are generally safe to use short term for most people, they are not without risks. However, taking an over-the-counter medication is one of the fastest ways to find almost immediate headache relief.

## 12. See a Doctor Immediately if Necessary

While most headaches are mild to moderate and can be self-managed, it's important to recognize some red flags for when you need to see a doctor immediately.

Seek immediate medical assistance (i.e. dial 911 or go to the nearest emergency room) if you have any of the following:

- Thunderclap headaches- If you have a severe headache that comes on suddenly (like a thunderclap) or if you get a headache that feels like the worst headache of your life.
- A headache accompanied by neurological changes. This may include changes such as slurred speech, confusion, difficulty moving a limb, loss of balance, or any vision changes.
- A Headache with fever and stiff neck, nausea, and vomiting.
- Any Headache after a head injury.
- A headache that worsens over 24 hours.
- If you just started to have headaches, especially if you are over 50.

Also, persistent or severe headaches may indicate other diabetes complications like high blood pressure or nerve damage.



## Bottom Line

Headaches can be severely disruptive to your day. But if you're aware of the unique ways that diabetes can influence headaches and equip yourself with some simple strategies, you can reduce both the frequency and severity of headaches safely and effectively.

To better manage your headaches, it's important to have some strategies in your arsenal to both prevent and effectively manage them. Also, know when to seek immediate medical assistance regarding a headache.

*Disclaimer: This article is for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always talk to your doctor or a qualified healthcare provider before making decisions about your health or starting any new treatment.*

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