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Imaging tests for headaches

When you need a CT scan or MRI—and when you don't

CT scans and MRIs are called imaging tests because they take pictures, or images, of the inside of the body. Many people who have very painful headaches want a CT scan or an MRI. They want to find out if their headaches are caused by a serious problem, such as a brain tumor. But most of the time you don't need these tests. Here's why:

Imaging tests rarely help.

Doctors see many patients for headaches. And most of them have migraines or headaches caused by tension. Both kinds of headaches can be very painful. But a CT scan or an MRI rarely shows why the headache occurs. And they do not help you ease the pain.

A doctor can diagnose most headaches during an office visit. The doctor asks you questions about your health and your symptoms. This is called a medical history. Then the doctor does a test of your reflexes, called a neurological exam. If your medical history and exam are normal, imaging tests usually will not show a serious problem.



CT scans have risks.

A CT scan of the head uses a low radiation dose. This may slightly increase the risk of harmful effects. Risks from radiation exposure may add up, so it is best to avoid unnecessary radiation. The results of your test may also be unclear. This can lead to more tests and even treatment that you do not need.

Imaging tests cost money.

The cost of a CT scan or MRI ranges from about \$500 to more than \$1,000. This depends on the test and where it's done. Costs of a scan may be higher if the results are unclear and your doctor orders more tests or treatment.

When should you have an imaging test for headaches?

In some cases you might need a CT scan or an MRI. You might need one if your doctor cannot diagnose your headache based on your exam and medical history. Or you might need one if the exam finds something that is not normal.



You may also need a CT scan or an MRI if you have unusual headaches. See your doctor right away if:

- You have headaches that are sudden or feel like something is bursting inside your head.
- Your headaches are different from other headaches you've had. This is especially true if you are age 50 or older.
- Your headaches happen after you have been physically active.
- You have headaches with other serious symptoms, such as a loss of control, a seizure or fit, or a change in speech or alertness.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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Advice from Consumer Reports

How to treat a headache

You can help most headaches by taking these steps:

Avoid triggers. Triggers are events that can cause headaches. These tips can help you avoid triggers:

If you have migraines:

- Wear tinted glasses in bright light.
- Do not skip meals, and stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water.
- Avoid alcohol, meat with added nitrates (such as cold cuts), and aged cheeses (hard, dry cheeses such as parmesan).

If you have tension headaches:

- Avoid getting overtired.
- Hold your back and neck straight when you sit or stand.
- Keep your jaw relaxed (not clenched).

Quit smoking. Smoking can bring on either kind of headache.

Manage stress. Try meditation, yoga, stretching, or other activities that can help you relax.

Get plenty of sleep. Aim for six to eight hours of sleep each night. Set a regular time to go to bed and to wake up. Avoid watching TV or using a computer just before you go to bed.

Get plenty of exercise. Regular exercise, such as brisk walking, cycling, or swimming, can reduce stress and ease both kinds of headaches.

Nonprescription pain medicines can help.

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol or generic), ibuprofen (Advil or generic), naproxen (Aleve or generic), or a combination of aspirin, ibuprofen, and caffeine (Excedrin Extra Strength, Excedrin Migraine or generic). You can buy all of these without a prescription. The generic versions, including store brands, cost less and are just as safe and effective as the brand-name pills.
- Try not to take any of these pills more than once or twice a week. Overuse can make headaches worse and cause side effects.

To help severe migraines, ask your doctor about these prescription drugs:

- Triptans, such as rizatriptan (Maxalt or generic) and sumatriptan (Imitrex or generic)
- Beta-blockers, such as propranolol (Inderal or generic)