

Headache

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CHAPTER

14

Headache has been called 'the most common complaint of civilized man' affecting approximately two-thirds of the population. Athletes suffer from the same causes of headache as non-athletes. In addition, there are several causes of headache that relate directly to exercise. Numerous attempts have been made to classify the different types of headache. Headaches may be classified into seven groups, the first four of which are seen commonly and the second three less commonly:

1. headache associated with viral illness, for example, respiratory infections, sinusitis, influenza
2. vascular headaches, for example, migraine, cluster headache
3. cervical headache, for example, referred from joints, muscles and fascia of the cervical region
4. tension headache or muscle contraction headache
5. intracranial causes, for example, tumor, hemorrhage, subdural hematoma, meningitis
6. exercise-related headache, for example, benign exertional headache, 'footballers' migraine'
7. other causes, for example, drugs, psychogenic, post-spinal procedure, post-traumatic.

The first four causes listed are seen frequently in the community. Exercise-related and post-traumatic headache are of particular concern in athletes. While it is usually possible to differentiate between the groups, headaches of mixed type occur commonly.

The International Headache Society (IHS), in conjunction with the World Health Organization (WHO), has proposed an overall classification for headache.¹ While this classification system is used

mainly for research purposes, it nevertheless provides a framework to assist in clinical management.

Clinical approach to the patient with headache

The majority of headaches do not require medical assessment. However, certain symptoms may indicate the presence of more serious abnormalities and require medical assessment. These symptoms are:

- new or unaccustomed headache
- atypical headache
- stiff neck or meningeal signs
- systemic symptoms, for example, fever, weight loss, malaise
- neurological symptoms, for example, drowsiness, weakness, numbness of limbs
- local extracranial symptoms, for example, ear, sinus, teeth
- changes in the pattern of headache
- headache increasing over a few days
- sudden onset of severe headache
- headaches that wake the patient up during the night or in the early morning
- chronic headache with localized pain.

The clinical approach to the athlete complaining of headache is shown in Figure 11.1. The practitioner should:

1. exclude possible intracranial causes. These include hemorrhage, tumor, infection and subdural hematoma. If an intracranial abnormality is suspected as a result of a full neurological examination, imaging of the brain with CT or MRI may be indicated.

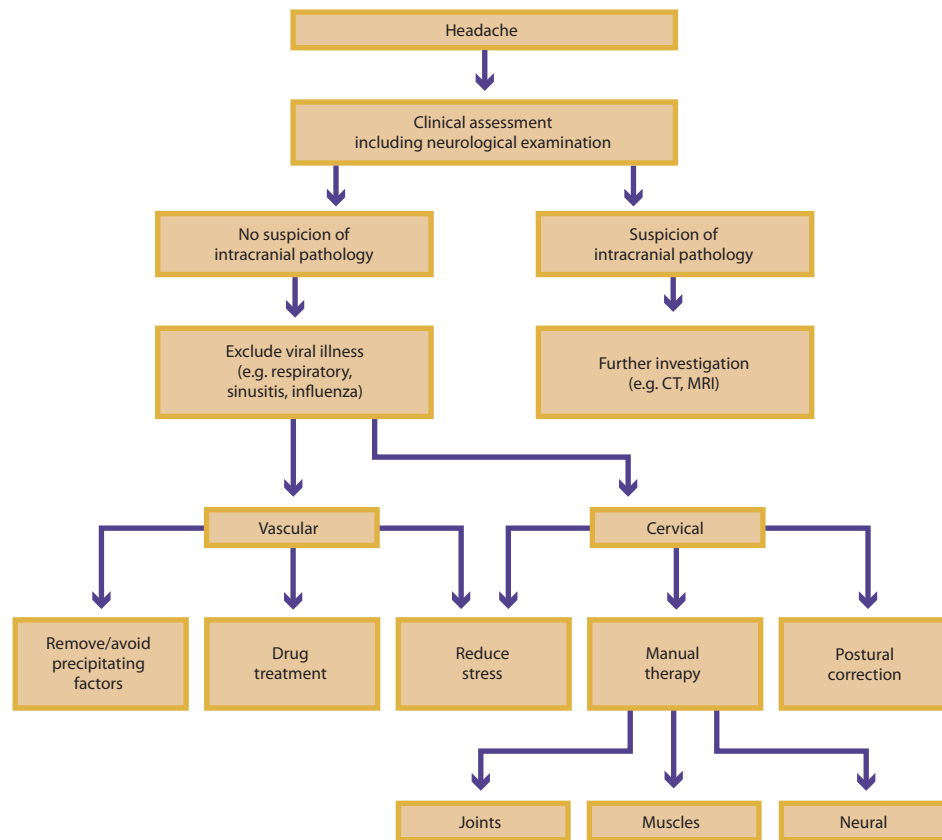


Figure 14.1 Clinical approach to the patient with headache

2. exclude headache associated with a viral illness. The presence of common illnesses that may provoke headache should be excluded. These include respiratory tract infection, sinusitis and influenza.
3. exclude drug-induced headaches. Many commonly used drugs can provoke headache. A list of these drugs is shown below:
 - alcohol
 - analgesics, such as aspirin (ASA), codeine
 - antibiotics and antifungals
 - antihypertensives, such as methyl dopa
 - caffeine
 - corticosteroids
 - cyclosporin
 - dipyridamole
 - indomethacin
 - monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs)
 - nicotine
 - nitrazepam
 - nitrous oxide
 - oral contraceptives
 - sympathomimetics
 - theophylline
 - vasodilators.
4. exclude exercise-related headache.
5. differentiate between vascular, tension and cervical causes. If the above three groups are excluded, the majority of headaches are then due either to vascular causes, such as migraine, or referred from the joints and/or muscles of the neck. Classic vascular and cervical headaches each have distinctive features (Table 14.1), although frequently features of both types may be present. Tension headaches may occur unrelated to cervical injury or dysfunction and tend to be of a low-grade daily headache presentation. In some cases, external stress is important in both their genesis and continuity.