Do You Have Chronic Headaches? They Could Be Caused by OA

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How Does Osteoarthritis Cause Headaches?

Most people are aware that osteoarthritis can cause considerable pain and discomfort to your joints. However, one of the lesser-known symptoms of arthritis is that it can cause chronic headaches.

You would think osteoarthritis of the joints would not lead to headaches because the skull itself does not have any areas where arthritis can take its toll or cause discomfort. However, some of the body's compensatory mechanisms and medication you take can lead to the headaches experienced with arthritis.

Tension Headaches

One of the most common reasons a person with arthritis suffers from headaches is due to the compensatory straining and increased tension of the various muscles of the body. Chronic pain can lead to a variety of physiological changes of the body, and muscle guarding is one of them.

An arthritic joint sends out pain signals, which causes you to tense up in a variety of other places in the body, particularly the neck and shoulders. Once the neck and shoulder muscles tighten up and become stiff due to the chronic headaches, it can lead to tension headaches.

Tension headaches are often described as a sensation of constant pressure. The pain is often on both sides of the head and is usually mild, but can also be severe.

Rebound Headaches

Another phenomenon known to cause headaches for arthritis sufferers is rebound headaches. Many people with arthritis often take medication to help cope with the pain of arthritis, and reasonably so.

However, some of these medications, if used near daily, can lead to chronic headaches. These medications include acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Motrin) and Aspirin. When the pain medication wears off, you may experience a withdrawal reaction, prompting you to take more medication, which only leads to another headache and the desire to take more medication.

So, the cycle continues until you start to suffer from chronic daily headaches with more severe headache pain and more frequent headaches.

Rebound headaches occur when the overuse of pain medication interferes with the brain centers that regulate the flow of pain messages to the nerves, worsening headache pain.

The symptoms that indicate a rebound headache are: they occur every day (especially once you wake up), they are persistent throughout the day and they improve with the headache-causing medication but get worse without

them.

If you are taking one of these over-the-counter medications on a daily basis and suspect you may have rebound headaches, a frank conversation with your primary care physician may be necessary. A general rule of thumb is that if you are taking medication for your headache for more than half of the days of the month, the medication may actually be perpetuating, or even causing, the problem.

Stress Headaches

The last and simplest reason osteoarthritis can lead to headaches is due to the stress associated with the condition.

The physical limitations and pain that arthritis causes can be very stressful. Many activities and minor problems that healthy people can do without skipping a beat can really bog down arthritis sufferers.

All of the added stress of the chronic condition can manifest as chronic headaches. Stress headaches, similar to tension in the muscles of the neck and shoulders, often lead to tension headaches.

Methods of Treatment

Although arthritis can lead to unrelenting headaches, there a couple ways one can alleviate these headaches and prevent them from happening. These methods include: mixing up your methods of pain relief, practicing meditation and living a healthy lifestyle.

How to Find Pain Relief

Pain medication may be a necessity for an arthritic sufferer, but mixing up your methods of pain relief can help prevent the phenomenon of rebound headaches.

There are a variety of alternatives to pain relief besides medication for arthritis:

- Lidocaine and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID) gels.
- Lidocaine and NSAID patches.
- TENS units.
- Serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRI) medication.

Most over-the-counter pain-relieving medications are safe and typically tolerated well, but they should be only part of the pain-relieving regimen. Again, having a meaningful conversation with your primary care physician can help you discover other pain-relieving medication and modalities so you don’t need to solely rely on the over-the-counter medications.

Meditation

Meditation is also a great way to reduce your stress caused by living with arthritis. Meditation and other relaxation therapies can be a great way of breaking the cycle of focusing on your pain.

A theory supported by a recent study on meditation explains that by activating and reinforcing certain areas of the brain used in pain processing, meditation can reduce pain intensity in patients. Studies conducted within the past 10 years have shown that meditation may be able to change the four areas of the brain involved in pain processing or emotional and behavioral regulation.

Meditation also increases activity in the pain and emotion regulating areas of the brain and can help control emotional reactions to pain. It is thought meditation can decrease pain by simply lowering your stress level.

Lastly, meditation can help to reduce stress by simply pushing out the worrisome thoughts and ideas that

consume most people during the week. Even a 10-minute meditation break can greatly relax a person and potentially prevent a stress headache from coming on.

Healthy Lifestyle

Headaches are a complex symptom that manifests due to a number of triggers. However, research has shown that living a healthy lifestyle can prevent the frequency and duration of headaches.

A healthy lifestyle involves eating healthy, sleeping adequately and having a regular exercise program. Cutting out processed foods and eating more fruits, nuts and vegetables can help reduce your weight, give you more energy and greatly reduce your headaches.

Improper sleep by itself can cause headaches and a consistent pattern of seven to eight hours of sleep a night can help to prevent headaches.

Lastly, a consistent exercise program can improve your circulation, increase the feel-good hormones known as endorphins, and relax you by using up anxious energy. All these benefits of exercise can reduce the likelihood of getting an arthritis headache.