

Cervicogenic Headache



Cervicogenic Headache ... the most common headache

'Cervicogenic headache is widespread. The neck can trigger other forms of headache including tension headache and migraine, or be the actual cause of tension headache and migraine.'²⁻⁵

If headache is one-sided headache, which, for example occurs on the left, and the next episode on the right, that is, it swaps sides between episodes (or within the same episode) or similarly, headache on both sides of the head at the same time, but is stronger on the left and other times on the right, this confirms that the neck is responsible for headache.^{2,5}

Other features indicating that the neck is the cause of headache are:

- headache starting in the neck and/or headache that is accompanied by neck discomfort or stiffness
- one-sided headache or headache on both sides but stronger on the one (always the same) side
- headache triggered by sustained postures, for example neck forward bending
- ongoing headache (4 weeks) after head and/or neck injury
- headache that is gradually becoming more frequent

Ironically though, even if headache does not have any of these features it still could be Cervicogenic Headache.

In this case, a physical examination by a practitioner specifically (post-graduate) trained in examination of the upper cervical spine is required to confirm or rule out a neck disorder as the cause of headache or migraine.^{3,5}

What can disturb the structures in my neck?

The average head weighs approximately 5.4kg and is balanced on a relatively narrow column made up of seven vertebrae. The neck is the most mobile part of the spine and structures are relatively easily disturbed.

Structures of the upper neck can be injured during trauma to the neck and / or head, for example an acceleration / deceleration injury or 'whiplash' where the head is thrown forward and / or backward.

Introduction

'Cervicogenic' refers to 'neck-related' and therefore the cause of 'Cervicogenic Headache' lies in the neck; more specifically research has shown that the cause will be found in the top three spinal segments or joints.¹

Consequently head pain is referred from a disturbance of any structure supplied by the top three spinal nerves. These structures include an intervertebral disc, small muscles, joints and their associated ligaments and capsules.¹

How can the neck disorder refer pain to the head?

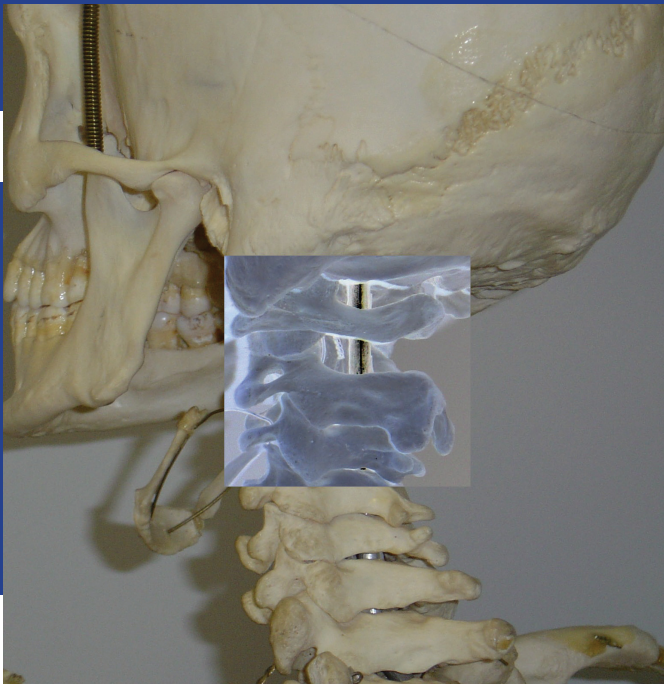
Head pain occurs when normal signals from structures within the head and abnormal signals from the upper neck merge in the top part of the spinal cord. Together the normal and abnormal information then travels to the brain. The brain incorrectly interprets the abnormal information (which came from the neck) as coming from inside the head, and head pain is produced.¹

How can I tell if my neck is the cause?

One of the confusing phenomena about Cervicogenic Headache is that its symptoms can present as Migraine, Tension Headache or even Cluster Headache.²⁻⁶

So even though your headache may have been diagnosed as Migraine, Tension Headache, Cluster Headache etc., it may actually be a 'Cervicogenic Headache'... and there is one feature, which confirms that the upper neck is responsible for headache, and that is the behaviour of head pain.

Cervicogenic Headache



'... it is now considered critical that the upper cervical spine is examined when investigating headache and migraine conditions.'²⁻⁵

The neck is also stressed when the head is subjected to sudden, unexpected blows to the head as in concussion injuries. If headache persists after the concussive state has settled then it is likely to be coming from injured structures in the upper neck.⁷

Non-traumatic causes include sustained head / neck postures (particularly) neck flexion or forward bending of the head. Research has shown that in these positions the weight of the head on the neck increases from 5.4kg to 27.2kg!⁸

The Physical Examination.

Recent research in headache has caused a radical shift in assessment and treatment of headache; it is now considered critical that the upper cervical spine is examined when investigating headache and migraine conditions.²⁻⁵ Authorities agree and research^{3,5} has shown that the **most convincing confirmation of Cervicogenic Headache is reproduction of usual head pain and easing of the pain as the technique is sustained, when examining the upper neck joints.**^{3,5,9,10}

The Watson Headache® Approach by selectively stressing individual joints in a smooth, gradual, sustained manner not only confirms Cervicogenic Headache, but also specifically the joints involved. This takes the guesswork out of examination and treatment, significantly increasing the chances of a successful outcome.

The Treatment.

Specific (non manipulative, that is, not 'cracking') techniques can correct the responsible disorder, but providing the most advanced treatment techniques to correct the disorder does not necessarily guarantee a successful outcome - the outcome can be affected by other factors.

Therefore an uncomplicated exercise program along with identification and modification of any headache contributing postures and lifestyle activities often complement precise techniques of the Watson Headache® Approach.

Take Home Messages:

- a one-sided headache that can occur on either side between episodes (or within the same episode); or headache on both sides that is stronger on one side and then on the other side; or headache that keeps 'moving around' confirms Cervicogenic Headache
- Cervicogenic Headache is often mistaken for Migraine, Tension Headache or Cluster Headache
- assessment of the upper cervical spine requires specific training and experience. A sound knowledge of current examination and treatment protocols and a firm grasp of the affected anatomy is vital to the success of treatment
- reproduction and easing of usual head pain during examination of the top three spinal joints is the ultimate confirmation of Cervicogenic Headache

Examination of the upper cervical spine could prevent a lifetime of medication because Headache or Migraine, could be a Cervicogenic Headache and Cervicogenic Headache can be treated.

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