



# How to Treat a Headache with Herbs

Expert  
Reviewed

Three Methods: [Identifying Your Headache](#) [Treating Tension Headaches](#) [Treating Migraine Headaches](#)

When you feel a pounding, throbbing or stabbing pain in your head, you can usually diagnose yourself. You have a headache. Primary headaches are most common and include tension, cluster, or migraine headaches. While pain relievers are available to treat these headaches, many people choose to treat their headaches naturally, with herbs. Identify the type of headache you have and use an herb or aromatherapy that is known to help ease pain and reduce inflammation.

Method  
1

## Identifying Your Headache

**1 Determine if you have a tension headache.** This is the most common type of headache and it tends to be on both sides of the head, most often starting at the back of the head. The headache may “move” forward and affect the eyes. The pain is most often described as dull or feeling like a tight band is around your head.<sup>[1]</sup>

- Tension headaches are often caused by tightened or strained muscles in the head and neck. These headaches can be related to stress, depression and mood disorders, injuries and the position that the head is held at for long periods of time.<sup>[2]</sup>

**2 Figure out if you have a migraine headache.** They tend to be on one side of the head, but may spread to both sides. The pain tends to be worse with movement, light, sounds, and can be triggered by a variety of things including food, drug withdrawal, alcohol, coffee, or a lack of sleep. Migraine pain tends to be pounding or throbbing.<sup>[3]</sup>

- Migraine headaches are often associated with nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to sound, light and smells. Migraines may also be associated with “auras” or warning signs that a migraine is on its way. These auras are visual (flashes of light, blind spots), sensory (tingling in the face, hand) or associated with smells. Migraines with or without auras are treated in similar ways.<sup>[4]</sup>

**3 Decide if you have a cluster headache.** These are very painful, with the pain usually described as sharp, piercing or stabbing.<sup>[5]</sup> Cluster headaches occur in groups or clusters over several times a day, lasting days, weeks or months. They tend to occur at the same times during the day but last for an hour or less. Cluster headaches usually go away for days, weeks or months.<sup>[6]</sup>

- Cluster headaches should not be treated at home. While some herbal or aromatherapy treatments can be used in addition to professional treatment, they should not be used on their own.

**4 Consider if you have another type of headache.** Other types of headaches include sinus headaches, associated with pain at the front of the head, often around the cheeks, eyes and forehead. A sinus headache is associated with infections and allergies.<sup>[7]</sup>

- Headaches can also be associated with stopping the use of pain medications (rebound headaches), fevers, or be a part of pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS).

**5 See a doctor if you have a serious concern.** If you have headaches that don't seem to have an explanation in increased stress, lack of sleep or just seem “different” to you, don't hesitate to see a healthcare professional soon.

Rarely, a headache can be a symptom of more serious condition. These conditions include:

- Brain hemorrhages (bleeding in the brain)
- Brain tumors
- High blood pressure
- Brain infections or abscesses
- An increase in intracranial pressure

- Lack of oxygen while sleeping (sleep apnea)
- Stroke
- Brain aneurysm (a defect in a brain blood vessel)

**Method  
2****Treating Tension Headaches**

**1 Look for herbs that have sedative and antispasmodic elements.** Herbs such as kava-kava, valerian, passionflower can act as relaxing agents, relieving the tension of tension headaches within hours.<sup>[8]</sup> Chamomile, mint or rosemary, while not proven to help headaches, can help you relax and feel less anxious.

- Note that rosemary can raise the blood pressure in some individuals.

**2 Use Kava-kava.** Kava-kava has pain-relieving properties, reduces anxiety and improves sleep.<sup>[9]</sup> Follow the manufacturer's directions, but in general, take about 75 mg of kava-kava.<sup>[10]</sup> The main side effect reported with kava is drowsiness.

- People diagnosed with kidney disease, Parkinson's disease, liver disease, blood diseases or taking alprazolam or levodopa should not use kava-kava.

**3 Take valerian root.** This remedy has been used for centuries and works by increasing the calming neurotransmitters in your brain.<sup>[11]</sup> In general, take 150-300mg of valerian.<sup>[12]</sup> Valerian should not be taken if you are allergic to it or have been diagnosed with liver problems. Side effects such as upset stomach, headaches and drowsiness have been reported.

- Valerian should not be taken with many other medications, so check with a knowledgeable healthcare professional first if you are taking any other medications.

**4 Use passionflower.** Passionflower has not been very extensively studied, but has a long history of use. It also appears to increase increase calming neurotransmitters in the brain.<sup>[13]</sup> This can reduce tension and anxiety and may directly reduce pain.<sup>[14]</sup> In general, take 100-150mg of passionflower.<sup>[15]</sup>

- Passionflower has no known side effects, drug interactions or contraindications.

**5 Make a tea that includes any or all of these herbs.** You can use tea leaves, or purchase a tincture, which is an extract of these herbs, from a nutritional or health food store. Drink 1 or 2 cups at the first sign of a headache.

- You can add about 150mg of hops as well. Hops is known in botanical medicine as a tonic and sedative, working to strengthen your whole system and helping you relax.<sup>[16]</sup>

**6 Look for Hepataplex.** If you have a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) practitioner near you, ask for Hepataplex (long dan xie gan tang containing beets, milk thistle, parsley, dandelion, boldo, greater celandine and other minor ingredients). This is a traditional combination of Chinese herbs that has been shown to be very effective in relieving tension headaches by reducing inflammation and strengthening the liver and kidneys which are important for overall health. Take 2 pills three times a day as needed (with or without meals).<sup>[17]</sup>

**7 Diffuse essential oils.** Place essential oils such as chamomile, mint, rosemary, lemon balm, or lavender into a diffuser at the first sign of a headache. These can help you relax and feel less anxious. Note that lemon balm should not be used by anyone with thyroid problems.

**Method  
3****Treating Migraine Headaches**

**1 Take 25 to 75mg of feverfew twice a day.** Feverfew contains anti-inflammatory and anti-spasmodic compounds and works to reduce inflammation. This may dilate the constricted blood vessels that may be underlying migraine pain.<sup>[18]</sup> Feverfew is well-known for treating the pain of migraines, and reducing their frequency.

- If you are allergic or have any sensitivities to any plant in the aster family, you should not use feverfew. Feverfew should not be used if you have a bleeding disorder or before surgery unless under the advice of a knowledgeable healthcare practitioner.

**2 Take 50 to 75mg of butterbur twice a day.** This is one of the best studied herbs and shown to be effective at treating migraines.<sup>[19]</sup> It works much the same way as feverfew, by reducing inflammation. Butterbur should not be used if you have been diagnosed with congestive heart failure.

**3 Try willow bark, skullcap, or ginkgo biloba.** These are often recommended by naturopathic physicians. Willow bark acts like a sort of natural aspirin, without the side effects.<sup>[20]</sup> Skullcap appears to increase local levels of oxygen in the blood<sup>[21]</sup> and ginkgo functions as an anti-oxidant and protects brain cells.<sup>[22]</sup>

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**5 Make a tea that includes any or all of these herbs.** You can use tea leaves, or purchase a tincture, which is an extract of these herbs, from a nutritional or health food store. Drink 1 or 2 cups at the first sign of a headache.

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### Tips

- Make sure you are drinking plenty of water. Many headaches are worse if you are dehydrated.
- No matter what type of headache you have, taking time to relax can help.
- None of these herbs have been tested specifically for cluster headaches. Talk to your healthcare practitioner for advice on using these herbs for cluster headaches.
- Try taking these remedies as herbal teas rather than capsules or tablets. Drinking a nice hot cup of tea is much more relaxing than popping some capsules.

## Warnings

- None of these herbs have been tested in children. Talk to a qualified healthcare practitioner before giving children any herb or medicine.
- None of these herbs have been tested in pregnant or breastfeeding women. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, you should only take these herbs on the advice of a qualified healthcare practitioner.
- Watch for mouth sores if you take feverfew leaves by mouth instead of in a capsule form. Feverfew herbs have also caused mild gastrointestinal upset and nervousness in some people.

## Sources and Citations

1. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/migraine-with-aura/basics/symptoms/con-20030404>
2. <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003024.htm>
3. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/migraine-with-aura/basics/symptoms/con-20030404>

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