The Headache You Didn't Know About

Wellness Chinese Medicine – Dr. Cao Yafei

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Headaches are extremely common and one of the most frequent reasons for visits to neurology clinics. However, they are also highly complex, with most patients unable to identify a clear cause.

Headaches can be broadly categorized into two groups. The first includes those with identifiable causes, such as intracranial tumors, hemorrhages, meningitis, or hypertension-related organic disorders. The second group comprises headaches without a clear cause, also known as **"primary headaches"**, which account for the vast majority of cases.

To treat headaches effectively, the first step is to identify headaches caused by organic conditions and address their "root" causes. After ruling out organic disorders, primary headaches can then be classified and treated accordingly.

Types of Primary Headaches

Migraine: Affects 9.3% of the population, with women being twice as likely as men to experience it.Characteristics: Unilateral, pulsating pain of moderate to severe intensity that worsens with physical activity. Often accompanied by nausea, vomiting, photophobia, or phonophobia.

Tension-Type Headache: Affects 10.8% of the population.Characteristics: Bilateral, non-pulsating, pressing pain of mild to moderate intensity that does not worsen with physical activity. May be accompanied by muscle tension in the head, but without nausea or vomiting.

Cluster Headache: Occurs in clusters over a period, with frequent and excruciatingly severe pain. Typically associated with autonomic symptoms like unilateral tearing or sweating. This is the most severe type of headache and more common in men. The pain can be so unbearable that some patients consider suicide.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Accurate diagnosis and classification of headaches are essential for targeted treatment. This requires patients to provide detailed descriptions of their medical history. Careful inquiry is often more valuable than diagnostic tests. Since headaches tend to follow specific patterns, observing and documenting these patterns can help doctors identify triggers and enable patients to avoid them in daily life.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Approach

Primary headaches, which lack identifiable organic causes, are often related to emotions, lifestyle habits, and disruptions in Qi and blood flow. In TCM, the head is referred to as the "meeting point of all Yang." Insufficient Qi and blood or the obstruction of pathogenic Qi can lead to headache episodes. Treatments like Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, and Tui Na (Chinese therapeutic massage) can effectively alleviate headache symptoms, improve quality of life, and help patients regain their daily functioning.