



# Headache Wellness Center

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## CLUSTER HEADACHES

Although cluster headaches affect a smaller percentage of the population than migraine, they are much more painful. Men suffer from cluster headaches six times as often as women. The cycle of episodic cluster headaches lasts about 4-8 weeks with a headache free period lasting from six months to two years. Chronic cluster headaches occur periodically for over a year without a headache free period.

Distinguishing characteristics of a cluster headache include the following:

1. The headache is generally on one side of the head, often around one eye.
2. The pain is extremely intense and described as sharp or boring.
3. The headache last from 30-120 minutes and occurs 1-6 times per day during the cluster period.
4. Cluster headaches often occur during the night disrupting sleep with intense pain.
5. On the side of the headache, there is often redness and tearing of the eye, congestion and drainage of the nostril and a drooping eyelid. Because of these symptoms, cluster headaches are often confused with sinus or allergy headaches.
6. Cluster headaches often occur the same time every day and the same time each year, with July and January being peak periods.
7. Nausea and vomiting are not associated with cluster headaches as they are with migraine.
8. Lying down often will increase the headache.

Our knowledge of cluster headaches has improved but much has yet to be learned. It is known that these headaches are associated with vasodilation or the unnatural widening of blood vessels in the head. There is a higher than usual incidence of drinking alcoholic beverages and smoking cigarettes in people with cluster headaches. If a patient is in a cluster cycle, air travel, high altitudes, strong sunlight, alcohol, stress letdown, naps, exertion, diet and some heart and blood pressure medications may trigger the headache.

Treatment for the acute headaches include inhalation of 100% oxygen and/or medication. Preventive therapy includes medication, discontinuation of smoking and alcohol during the cluster cycle.