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health

ILLUSTRATION: JULIETTE BORDA

## Out of My Head

78 percent of adults experience tension headaches.

POR CARLOS J. QUEIRÓS  
April/May 2007

The past five years for Auzenda Silva have been one headache after another—literally. “It feels like an earthquake inside my head,” says the 40-year-old professional housecleaner and mother of two, “and it often builds up to a nine on the Richter scale.”

Silva isn’t alone in her pain—or in seeking solutions. Headaches are a leading reason why people see doctors, accounting for millions of office visits annually. The International Headache Society lists more than 150 headache types, with causes ranging from diet, stress, and lack of sleep to depression, arthritis, and menopause. Many headaches are a combination of two or more types.

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Most common are tension headaches. “When patients describe a pain that circles the top of their head like a crown, I know we’re almost certainly dealing with a tension headache,” says Pedro Steven De Macedo, clinical assistant professor of neurology at George Washington University.

Because the pain associated with tension headaches can be severe, De Macedo says, many people think they’re suffering from migraines but aren’t.

Migraines are the second most common headache, affecting 29.5 million Americans—10 percent of the population—including Silva. Like many sufferers, Silva takes over-the-counter medications when she feels a headache starting and says she has come to accept

If you have these symptoms, says Dr. Pedro Steven De Macedo, see your doctor.

**First:** A headache that feels unlike any other you’ve experienced.

**Worst:** A headache similar to others but more severe.

**Cursed:** A headache that causes disorientation or impedes

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that she may just have to live with them.

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But De Macedo insists that most headaches never have to happen. To ward them off, try exercising regularly, practicing relaxation and deep breathing, not skipping meals, eating well, and reducing caffeine intake to avoid dependence and withdrawal headaches.

"Because headaches are so common, there's a widespread misconception among people that it's their lot in life to suffer from them," De Macedo says. "The truth is that the overwhelming majority could be managed and effectively dealt with."

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For information on how to prevent and fight headaches, visit [Medline Plus](#).

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