Chronic headaches – the hidden psychological factors

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Abstract

Introduction: Chronic headaches are a group of diseases with variable prevalence and impact on patients quality of life. Until a few years ago most of the investigation and the attention on this theme was directed on the role of biological factors. Nevertheless, these are insufficient to explain all the aspects of these pathologies. Currently, chronic headaches are recognized as a group of biopsychosocial diseases in which biological, psychological and environmental/social processes are considered scientifically inseparable.

Objectives: The authors aim to summarize the influence of the psychological factors on the development, course and consequences of chronic headaches.

Methods: Literature review based on articles published on PubMed/MEDLINE, between January 2005 and January 2015, using the keywords “chronic headaches”, “psychological” and “risk factors”.

Results: Several psychological factors may significantly alter the development of headache episodes, the perception of pain severity, the disability, treatment adhesion and prognosis. However, these factors usually are only thought of on clinical situations associated with significant psychopathology. The main psychological factors are headache management locus of control beliefs, self-efficacy beliefs and negative affect/emotional states, mainly depression, anxiety and anger. The authors will describe the impact of each factor.

Discussion and Conclusions: On the management of “head pain”, the physician must be aware of this a real complaint. The biopsychosocial model turns chronic headaches on a clinical challenge and so it is crucial that the physicians are familiarized with the psychological factors involved. In fact, only then can they make a correct and early diagnosis to maximize the therapeutic benefits and to minimize the functional impact of chronic headaches.