Mastering the Headache History
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Objectives:
- Identify headache red flags to differentiate primary from secondary headaches
- Apply the 5 key histories important for headache
- Recognize important nuances in a headache history

Important information for a thorough headache history:
- Headache red flags include systemic symptoms, neurological symptoms/signs, sudden onset, older age of onset, postural aggravation, precipitated by Valsalva, pregnancy, and progressive
- Understanding a person’s life headache history helps give context to the patient’s current headache condition
- Headache attack history needs to include information on each type of headache, whether the current headache is new or old, and frequency of headache days and headache-free days
- Many medical conditions are co-morbid with migraine, and assessing for and treating them are important in headache management
- The headache history needs to include information on sleep, caffeine use, ER visits, head/neck trauma, and abuse
- A headache medication history includes current medications plus ones used in the past, prescription, non-prescription and recreational drug use
- Migraine may not be diagnosed in family members, so in eliciting this history, it is important to ask about a family history of headaches, not migraines
- Insightful headache history questions include asking about fears, goals of care, impact on life, and what individuals actually do when in pain
- If a patient is refractory to treatment, return to the history and re-evaluate if other conditions are contributing or if the original diagnosis is accurate

References: