



**Essential Imaging**  
BC PATIENT SAFETY & QUALITY COUNCIL

# CT Scans for Uncomplicated Headache in Adults: A Guide for Essential Imaging

**Recommendation: “Imaging is not recommended for uncomplicated headache unless red flags are present.”<sup>1</sup>**

The BC Patient Safety & Quality Council has put together these Essential Imaging Conversation Guides for Care Providers to support and guide conversations with patients, based on the *BC Guidelines for Appropriate Imaging*.<sup>1</sup>

The need for imaging must be balanced against the risk of radiation. Unless red flags are present, patients with uncomplicated headache who have imaging fair no better than those who don't, and results do not affect management or the rate of recovery.<sup>1</sup> However, patients who are not aware of the risks and recommendations may request imaging. Here are some messages to inform and guide your conversations with patients requesting imaging for uncomplicated headaches.<sup>1</sup>



### Provide Information

If imaging is not indicated, inform patients that:

- While an uncomplicated headache can be difficult, patients likely do not need a CT scan of their head.
- Medical imaging tests don't help patients get better faster and they don't tell care teams why a patient may be having a headache.<sup>2</sup>
- A headache usually goes away on its own and patients tend to recover after a few weeks.
- Patients can help avoid complications and encourage recovery by following a few simple tips.



### Provide Advice



Talk to your patient about what they can do to encourage recovery, including:<sup>3</sup>

- Finding out what may be causing the headache in order to find the best treatment to reduce pain
- Avoiding or reducing smoking
- Managing and controlling stress
- Getting enough sleep (6-8 hours each night)
- Using non-prescription pain relievers or muscle relaxers such as acetaminophen, ibuprofen or naproxen
- Reading the *Conversation Guide for Patients – Uncomplicated Headache*

When in doubt, consult with radiology in your local community or through the RACE Line: [raceconnect.ca](https://raceconnect.ca)

### Start the Conversation!

Learn more and find additional clinical resources at [BCPSQC.ca/imaging](https://bcpsqc.ca/imaging).

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<sup>1</sup>BC Guidelines. Appropriate Imaging for Common Situations in Primary and Emergency Care. 2020. Diagnostic Imaging. Available from: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/practitioner-professional-resources/bc-guidelines/diagnostics-imaging>

<sup>2</sup>Choosing Wisely Canada. Imaging tests for headaches. When you need one and when you don't. [Internet pamphlet]. Toronto Canada; 2017. [cited 2020 March 10]. Available from: <https://bit.ly/3bevz4M>