



Headaches in Children – What You Should Know

Headaches are a fairly common occurrence in children and adolescents. Often triggered by tension, minor illnesses, sleep or dietary issues, dehydration or even a minor bump to the head, they are usually nothing to worry about. While headaches in children are rarely caused by a serious problem, how can you be sure? Following are answers to some common questions concerning headaches in children.

What is causing my child's headache?

Headaches can be categorized into two types – primary and secondary.

Primary headaches are not caused by any underlying disease. They are more likely to happen repeatedly and, although miserable, usually are not serious.

Examples include:

- **Migraines**, which affect one or both sides of the head and may make your child feel nauseated or sensitive to light or sound. Migraines may cause vomiting, after which your child may feel better, and they typically respond to rest in a dark room.
- **Tension headaches**, which cause pressure across the forehead or on one or both sides of the head.

Primary headaches can occur for many different reasons, such as:

- Not drinking enough fluids or skipping meals
- Drinking too much caffeine
- Not getting enough sleep
- Stress
- Puberty
- Vision problems

Secondary headaches are a symptom of an underlying disease. Examples include:

- Illness, such as a cold, flu or sinus infection
- Brain tumor
- Head injury
- Other rare illnesses

Primary headaches and secondary headaches due to an infection, such as a cold or other virus, are the most common causes of a headache in children. They are rarely caused by a serious underlying disease (like meningitis or a brain tumor).



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When should I worry?

You should call your child's healthcare provider if headaches are becoming worse or more frequent. Frequent headaches that interfere with your child's function should be evaluated by a healthcare provider because medication may be needed to prevent chronic daily headaches.

Contact your child's primary care provider right away for any of the following types of headaches:

- Starts after a head injury
- Wakes them up in the middle of the night or early in the morning
- Starts with severe neurological symptoms such as focal weakness, dizziness, loss of balance, or vision or hearing problems
- Occurs with other symptoms such as high fever, vomiting, or neck pain or stiffness
- Is triggered by exercise
- Is associated with: sickle cell disease, a bleeding disorder, an immune system disorder, heart problems or known cancer

Does my child need an MRI or other imaging?

Most children with headaches do not need an imaging test like an MRI or CT scan. In fact, these tests often expose children to unnecessary radiation and may lead to additional unnecessary tests or interventions, all of which also can be costly. Your healthcare provider is trained to get a complete history and perform a physical exam to determine whether your child's headache has any "red flags" that may require an imaging test.

Your healthcare provider will review with you the "red flags" that may suggest that your child should have imaging done, and include you in the decision-making. For example, if your child has a headache with a history of significant head trauma or if your child experiences headaches with other symptoms such as dizziness, visual problems or loss of balance your provider may order a CT scan or MRI right away.

In addition, if your child has a headache with fever, vomiting, neck stiffness and confusion, your healthcare provider may recommend a spinal tap to evaluate for meningitis.

Your description of your child's symptoms tells your healthcare provider most of what he or she needs to know. Keeping a

headache diary or journal can be helpful. Below are types of information that can be included in your child's headache diary:

- When did each headache start? (date/day of the week and time)
- What were you doing before the headache?
- Where is your pain when you have a headache?
- How bad is the pain? (use a scale of 1-10 or pictures)
- Do you have any symptoms before or after your headache, such as changes in vision or vomiting?
- What made your headache feel better? If you took pain medications, what was the dosage? Did it work?
- Did your headache feel better after doing something (like sleeping)?
- When did the headache end? (date/day of the week and time)

What can I do about my child's headaches?

Most headaches in children will resolve on their own. If your child does not need to see a clinician, have them drink lots of fluids, rest in a quiet, dark room, or take over-the-counter pain medications such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Give these pain medications only as directed by your child's healthcare provider.

To prevent headaches, encourage healthy behaviors in your child, such as getting enough sleep, eating healthy meals, drinking more water and avoiding caffeine. If headaches are related to stress, anxiety or depression, consider having your child talk to a counselor. The headache diary can also be used to identify headache triggers to avoid.

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