

Headaches in Children

Headaches are a common problem in children. About 11% of children and 28% of teenagers get frequent headaches.

What causes headaches?

There are different thoughts about why kids get headaches but can largely be because other family members get headaches too. Suggesting family traits play a role. Other possible reasons for headaches are fragile blood vessels, brain and nerve changes, and/or chemical changes in the body. There are medicines that can target these pathways to help treat headaches.

Headache Types

Migraine Headaches- Migraines are headaches that repeat in days, weeks, or months. Migraines have some to all of these signs and symptoms:

- Last 1-72 hours. Some migraines can last longer if not treated with rest and medicine
- Affect one or both sides of the head, near the temples or eyes, or pain all over
- Children can complain of a throbbing or pounding pain. They can also describe it using other describing words.
- Migraines are usually worse with normal activities like walking up the stairs, running, or riding a bicycle
- Belly pain, throwing up, and sensitivity to lights, smells, or sounds are common
- Warnings, called auras, may start before a headache. This is known as migraine with aura
 - Auras can include blurry eyesight, seeing flashing lights or colored spots, change in taste, or weird feelings. If your child experiences anything before a headache, talk to your doctor more about this
 - Auras can happen about 5-60 minutes before a migraine starts

Tension Type Headaches: Tension Type headaches are headaches that are most commonly described as mild to moderate pain that occurs on both sides of the head. Tension type headaches have the following symptoms:

- Can last from 30 minutes to many days
- Feels like a band around the head
- Can feel like muscle tightness
- Children may be sensitive to lights or sounds with tension type headaches

Chronic Headaches:

- Both migraines and tension type headaches can become chronic, meaning they happen at least 15 days out of each month over a 3 month period (or longer).
- Chronic headaches can be believed to keep occurring from taking medication too often. Such as acetaminophen (TYLENOL), ibuprofen (MOTRIN/ADVIL), or other prescription medications. These are called Medication overuse headaches. This type of headache is rare though and you should discuss at length with your doctor.

What do I do if my child gets a headache?

- Create a treatment plan with your doctor so you and your child understand their *as needed* medication for both home and school.
- Follow your doctor's instructions for treatment and using medicine. This may include *daily* medication and *as needed* medication. Call your doctor if you do not understand them.
- Have your child take their *as needed* medicine as soon as they feel the pain. This will help with how long the headache lasts.
- If your child is using their *as needed* medication more than 3 times a week or their *as needed* medication is not working, call your doctor to discuss next steps
- Drink more fluids during a headache, especially water, Gatorade or a Powerade. This may help get rid of the headache faster.

What can I do to help with prevention of my child's headaches?

These are things known as **lifestyle habits** that each child can do on their own to help their headaches. **Lifestyle habits** are not a cure for migraines but can help with how much they hurt, how long they last, or how often a child gets a migraine. **Lifestyle habits** can help with tension type headaches.

- **Fluids:** Make sure your child drinks enough fluids every day. Children and teens need 4-8 glasses (8 oz glasses) of fluids each day. Try not to drink caffeine such as soda, tea, or coffee. Focus more of your child's fluid intake on water.
- **Sleep:** Make sure your child gets plenty of sleep at night. Being too tired can cause headaches. Most children and teens need 8-10 hours of sleep every night. Keeping them on a regular sleep schedule through the entire week is helpful for prevention of headaches.
- **Nutrition:** Be sure that your child eats balanced meals every day. Include vegetables and protein. Do not skip meals. If you notice that your child has a headache after always eating a certain food, try to skip these foods and discuss more with your doctor.
- **Exercise/Stretching:** Try to encourage your child to get 45 minutes of cardio-like activity every day (running, swimming, biking) and 5-10 minutes of stretching every day. Weight lifting does not count as stretching or cardio-like activity.

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IN CARE OF KIDS

- **Stress:** Plan and schedule your child's activities wisely. Try to avoid crammed schedules or stressful and upsetting settings. Think about stress management counseling or relaxation methods if stress seems to cause more headaches or migraines for your child.
- **Electronics:** Encourage your child to have no more than 2 hours a day of free time on electronics. **This includes, TV, movies, videogames or computer use not done for school. Turn off all electronic devices 1 hour before bedtime to allow your child to relax for better sleep.**

Diaries

You and your child should keep a diary of your child's headaches. Write down when the headache started, how long it lasted, the pain level, what they took for pain and anything that you or your child think may have triggered the headache. Bad night of sleep, testing at school creating stress and not enough sleep, and skipping meals can be some examples of triggers. Remember that every child is different, so your child's triggers may be different from another child's or even your own if you suffer from headaches as a parent. MigraineBuddy® for Androids and iHeadache for iPhones are forms of electronic headache diaries.

Symptoms you should tell your doctor about right away:

- Headaches that wake your child from sleep in the middle of the night
- Throwing up early in the morning, without an upset stomach
- Worsening or more frequent headaches
- Personality changes or changes in energy levels that occur outside of having a headache
- If your child says: "this is the worst headache I've ever had"
- A headache that 'feels' different or has new symptoms
- Headaches with a stiff neck to where the child cannot touch their chin to their chest
- Any headaches that start right after an injury and do not go away with your home treatment plan

Websites for more information on headaches:

www.achenet.org

www.migraines.org

www.discoveryhealth.com