

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 reasons why kids get headaches. One common reason is because other family members get headaches too, suggesting family traits play a role. Other possible reasons 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. Your child may experience the following:

- Length: 1-72 hours (Sometimes longer if not treated with rest and medicine)
- Pain on one or both sides of the head, near the temples or eyes, or all over
- Throbbing or pounding pain (some children use other words to describe it)
- Worse with normal activities like walking up the stairs, running, or riding a bicycle
- Belly pain
- Throwing up
- Sensitivity to lights, smells, or sounds
 - Warnings, called auras, that start 5-60 minutes before a headache. This is known as “migraine with aura.” **If your child experiences anything before a headache, talk to their doctor**
 - Auras can include blurry eyesight, seeing flashing lights or colored spots, change in taste, or weird feelings.

Tension Type Headaches

Tension Type headaches are headaches that are mild to moderate pain on both sides of the head. Your child may have the following:

- Symptoms that last from 30 minutes to many days
- Pain that feels like a band around their head or muscle tightness
- Sensitivity to lights or sounds

Chronic Headaches

- Both migraines and tension type headaches can become chronic, meaning they happen at least 15 days each month over a 3 month period (or longer).
- Chronic headaches can keep occurring from taking medicine such as acetaminophen (TYLENOL), ibuprofen (MOTRIN/ADVIL), or other prescription medicines too often. These are called “Medication overuse headaches.”
 - This type of headache is rare and you should talk to your child’s doctor.

What should I do if my child gets a headache?

- Create a treatment plan with your child's doctor. This may include **daily** medicine and **as needed** medicine.
- Follow your doctor's instructions for treatment and using medicine. It is important for you and your child to understand their "**as needed**" medicine for both home and school. Call your child's doctor if you do not understand the instructions.
 - **Your child should take their "as needed" medicine as soon as they feel pain.** This will decrease the length of their headache.
 - **If your child is using their "as needed" medicine more than 3 times a week or it is not working, call your doctor for next steps**
- Encourage your child to drink more fluids during a headache, especially water, Gatorade or a Powerade. This may help get rid of the headache faster.

How can I prevent my child's headaches?

Lifestyle habits are things that your 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 your child gets a migraine. Lifestyle habits can also 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.
- Focus on drinking water, not caffeine such as soda, tea, or coffee.

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.
- Keep your child on a regular sleep schedule throughout the week.

Nutrition

- Make sure your child eats balanced meals every day. Include vegetables and protein.
- Do not skip meals.
- If you notice that your child always has a headache after eating a certain food, try to skip these foods and discuss more with your doctor.

Exercise and Stretching

- Your child should 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.

Stress

- Plan and schedule your child's activities to avoid crammed schedules or stressful and upsetting environments.
- Stress management counseling or relaxation methods are helpful if stress seems to cause more headaches or migraines for your child.

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Electronics

- Encourage your child to have less 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. Include the following information:

- When the headache started
- How long it lasted
- Pain level
- What medicine they took for pain
- Anything that you or your child think may have triggered the headache.
 - Examples: bad night of sleep, testing at school creating stress and not enough sleep, and skipping meals
 - Remember, 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 call 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 where your child cannot touch their chin to their chest
- A headache that starts after an injury and does not go away with your home treatment plan.

Websites for more information on headaches:

www.achenet.org

www.migraines.org

www.discoveryhealth.com

For questions or concerns, please call the Neurology Clinic at 720-777-6895