

Headaches and migraines

What is a headache?

A headache is an ache or pain that occurs in any region of the head. There are many different types and causes of headaches in children. Headaches are especially common in teenagers. Most are not serious and can be easily treated with simple measures such as Paracetamol and/or Ibuprofen.

Types of headaches

The most common types are tension and migraine headaches. These are known as primary headaches. Occasionally headaches are a symptom of another problem such as dental problems, infections, eye problems, ear problems, medication side effects or dehydration. Rarely, a child may have other symptoms with a headache that cause a doctor to be concerned about the brain and tests may be required. Your doctor will tell you if this is needed for your child.

What is a migraine?

A migraine is a headache that is usually more severe and tends to occur multiple times. Migraines can affect one or both sides of the head and may be worse with activity. Migraines are most common in childhood around age 15.

Signs and symptoms

A child with a migraine will have a headache with at least one of the following symptoms:

- nausea or vomiting
- sensitivity to light (photophobia)
- sensitivity to noise (phonophobia)

Some children with a migraine may experience an 'aura' prior to its onset. Auras may be a visual disturbance (such as a flash of light, blurred vision or blind spots), an odour or tingling in the hand or face that starts from a few seconds to an hour before the headache. A child usually experiences the same aura each time they have a migraine.

It can be hard to identify migraine symptoms if your child is too young to describe them to you. They may just want to go to sleep.

Migraine triggers

A trigger is something that brings on a migraine. Common triggers for migraines in children include:

- dehydration
- missing meals
- illness
- not enough sleep
- bright lights such as computer screens, fluorescent lights and sunlight
- certain foods

Common food triggers include chocolate, cheese, caffeinated drinks, additives such as monosodium glutamate (MSG) and aspartame (an artificial sweetener) and fatty or salty foods.

What age can a migraine start?

Migraines often start in childhood or adolescence and may decrease with age or continue through to adulthood. Migraines have been reported in children as young as seven.

Children with a family history of migraines are more likely to get a migraine.

Treating a migraine

Give your child Paracetamol (Panadol) or Ibuprofen (Nurofen) as soon as symptoms start. If your child gets an aura before the migraine, give the medications at the time the aura starts. Follow the instructions on the packaging to make sure you give your child the correct dose.

These simple painkillers are usually all that is required. Occasionally, children may require additional medication that is given through a drip or sprayed into the nose in hospital.

Medications containing codeine (e.g. Painstop or Panadeine) should not be used. They may make the migraine last longer or happen more often.

Resting in a quiet dark room may reduce symptoms. Migraines often settle with sleep.



When should I see a doctor?

See a doctor if your child has:

- any of the following symptoms with their headache:
 - fever
 - stiff neck
 - rash
 - repeated vomiting
 - problems walking or talking
 - a facial droop
 - weakness anywhere in the body
 - it is difficult to wake them up
 - problems with vision
 - seizure (fit)
- a headache that does not improve with Paracetamol (Panadol) or Ibuprofen (Nurofen)
- headaches that are getting more severe
- headaches that are happening often and interrupting your child's sleep or school attendance (consider keeping a diary of your child's symptoms to show to your doctor)

In an emergency, always call 000 immediately.

Otherwise, contact your local doctor or visit the emergency department of your nearest hospital. For non-urgent medical advice, call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) to speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the cost of a local call.

Migraine prevention

You can help your child prevent a migraine by encouraging them to:

- drink lots of water
- eat regular meals
- maintain good sleep patterns
- have downtime from screens
- manage stress
- avoid caffeinated soft drinks.

A healthy diet is very important in children and it is not recommended to restrict large important food groups as this can result in nutritional deficiencies. Talk to your doctor about avoiding food that could be a trigger for your child.

Things to remember

- Headaches are common especially in teenagers.
- Headaches are usually easily treated with Paracetamol or Ibuprofen.
- See a doctor if your child has a headache that does not improve with medicine, is getting headaches often or has any of the other symptoms described with the headache.
- Migraines are more severe headaches that occur multiple times.
- Healthy behaviours such as getting the right amount of rest, eating and drinking well and managing stress can help prevent migraines.

Further information

Headache Australia

<https://headacheaustralia.org.au/>

All information contained in this sheet has been supplied by qualified professionals as a guideline for care only. Seek medical advice, as appropriate, for concerns regarding your child's health.

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