

Patient Information

Headaches in Children

Children's Health



Introduction

This information leaflet explains about headache in children, some of the possible causes and what to look out for.

What is a headache?

Headaches affect people of all ages. Many adults remember having headaches as children. Headaches in children can occur on its own (primary disorder) or as a result of another condition. Primary headache disorders include migraine and tension type headache.

The most common primary headache disorder is migraine without aura. Migraines are a particular type of headache that tend to run in families. Unlike adult migraines, child migraines can often be on both sides of the head. Tension type headaches are the second most common primary headache disorder. They last longer and happen more frequently than migraines, but are less severe. Although rare, headaches can sometimes be caused by other conditions. Before a primary headache is diagnosed, clinical assessments and tests can rule out or confirm a secondary cause.

How common is headache in children?

Up to 50 percent of children aged 7 years, and up to 80 percent of 15 year olds have experienced at least one headache. Before puberty, headache affects girls and boys in equal numbers but after puberty, about three times as many girls get headaches compared to boys.

What causes headaches?

Some lifestyle issues can cause headaches or make existing headaches worse. These include:

- Not getting enough sleep
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Having much less to eat than usual
- Looking at screens for a long time
- Times of stress or anxiety
- Problems at school or a change in family circumstances
- Using too much medication (medication overuse headache)

Children often do not complain about their eyesight, but headaches could be a sign of being unable to see properly. It is important that they

have an eye check; these are free for children under 16 years of age. Please talk to your GP if your child is using medication more than three times a week to control a headache.

What is a headache diary?

A headache diary can be helpful in identifying trigger factors, the impact of medication, and it can help doctors make a diagnosis. Keep a record of when the headaches happen and record any event that's different from the normal routine; like a missed meal, sports activity or a late night, or an emotionally upsetting incident. If your child is old enough, they can keep their own diary. Please see '**Useful Links**' on the back cover of this leaflet.

Headache diary apps are also available. Please take your headache diary to any GP or hospital appointments for your child.

When should we see a GP?

Please seek an urgent GP appointment if your child has any of the following:

- Persistent/recurrent headaches waking up in the middle of the night or early in the morning
- New balance or co-ordination problems
- Daily nausea or vomiting, especially if this is early in the morning
- Headache is worse when bending forwards
- New change in vision, such as blurred or double vision
- Sudden change in behavior
- Holding their head or neck in an unusual position

Go to your nearest Emergency Department if your child has:

- A new headache which is the worse than they have ever had, especially at the back of the head
- Fever and new headache, especially if they also have a stiff neck, are complaining about the light or have a rash that does not go away. These are all signs of possible meningitis.

Call 999 if your child is having or has had a fit/seizure, especially if this is the first time, or if it continues for longer than 5 minutes.

Contact Telephone Numbers

Switchboard, Lister Hospital

☎ 01438 314333

Useful Links:

- <https://migrainetrust.org/live-with-migraine/self-management/keeping-a-migraine-diary/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/caring-for-a-newborn/helping-your-baby-to-sleep>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/eye-tests-in-children>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/headaches-in-children>