

MIGRAINE HEADACHES — Children and Adolescents

What are the symptoms of migraines in children?

The symptoms of migraines may be different based on the child's age:

Younger children: migraines can cause nausea, vomiting, and belly pain, and make children sensitive to light and noise. The headache can affect the whole head or just parts of the head.

Adolescents & Teens: symptoms tend to be more like those that an adult would get. The headache usually starts off slowly and can affect either one or both sides of the head. Some adolescent girls get migraines around the time of menstruation (their periods), and these are called “menstrual migraines.”



What is an “aura”?

An aura is any symptom or feeling that warns the child that a migraine is coming. Each child's aura is different, but in most cases they affect a child's vision, they might see flashing lights, bright spots, zig-zag lines, or lose part their vision. Some children might have numbness and tingling of the lips, lower face, and fingers of one hand. The aura usually lasts a few minutes and goes away when the headache starts.

When should my child see a doctor or nurse?

Take your child to be seen right away (without giving any medicine) if he or she has a headache that:

- Starts after a head injury
- Wakes him or her up from sleeping
- Is sudden and severe and happens with other symptoms, such as: vomiting; neck pain or stiffness; changes in vision; confusion; loss of balance; Fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher.

Your child should also be seen if he or she:

- Gets headaches more than once a month
- Is younger than 3 years old.

Are there tests my child should have?

Your child's health provider will probably be able to tell what is causing your child's headaches simply by taking a history of his or her symptoms and doing an exam. If they feel the need to rule out an underlying cause for the headache, an imaging test such as an MRI or a CT scan *might* be ordered.

How are migraines treated in children and adolescents?

Consult with your doctor to determine what is best for your child. There are medicines that can ease the pain of migraines; some you can buy over the counter and others require a prescription. There are also medicines that can help prevent migraines from happening in the first place, these require a prescription. The right medicine for your child will depend on how often he or she gets migraines and how severe they are. If your child gets migraines often (more than two or three times a week), work with your doctor to find a treatment that helps. Don't try to manage them on your own with pain medicines such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®) as taking over the counter pain medication too often can cause more headaches later.

What can I do to help when my child has a migraine?

When a migraine starts:

- Have your child rest in a quiet dark room with a cool cloth on his or her forehead.
- Encourage him or her to sleep.
- Give your child pain medication that you have talked to your doctor about. Read labels carefully and only use the dosage recommended for your child.



Is there anything I can do to keep my child from getting a migraine?

In some cases, migraines can be “triggered” or set off by certain foods or things that children do, and are unique to each person. Some possible headache triggers to avoid for children and adolescents include:

- Skipping meals, which lowers blood sugar levels
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Having too much caffeine
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Stress, good or bad. May be due to school life; busy lifestyle or “overscheduling” activities; family/friend related
- Food triggers or sensitivities (e.g., some foods containing nitrates such as bologna or hot dogs, too much caffeine in pop or chocolate etc.).

Headache diaries or calendars

Keeping a headache diary for your child may help you figure out what is triggering your child’s headaches, so you can avoid those triggers (see link below). For a *FREE* online headache diary, see the Boston Children’s Hospital website at: http://www.childrenshospital.org/centers-and-services/programs/f_n/headache-program/resources-for-families

In the diary, write down every time your child has a headache along with the following information:

- The time the headache started and ended.
- Where in the head the headache was; for example left side, right side, both sides or behind the eyes.
- How the headache felt; for example, “pounding” or “sharp”.
- What your child ate and did before the headache started.
- How bad is the headache? For younger children, consider using the FACES pain scale to help them describe the intensity of their headache pain (see: <http://www.wongbakerfaces.org/>)
- What you did to try to help; for example having your child rest in a dark room; did that work?
- What, if any, medicine you gave, including the name of the medicine and how much you gave.
- Any other symptoms your child had with the headache, for example numbness in his or her lips.

After you have been keeping a diary for a while, check to see if there are any foods or events that seem to bring on a headache. Then, try avoiding those triggers to see if headaches happen less often. Share the diary with your child’s doctor or nurse. This can help to better understand your child’s headaches, see how well medications are working, and choose the best treatment for your child. A *FREE* iHeadache® app to keep track of migraine headache patterns is available at: <http://www.iheadacheapp.com/>

ADDITIONAL ONLINE INFORMATION:

- KidsHealth: see “Headaches” <http://kidshealth.org/parent/general/aches/headache.html>
- National Headache Foundation, Children’s Headache Disorders <http://www.headaches.org/content/childrens-headache-disorders>
- National Health Service – Children’s Headaches <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/headaches/Pages/Headachesinchildren.aspx>

Adapted from:

- 1) Boston Children Hospital <http://www.childrenshospital.org/health-topics#/> Search “Headache
- 2) American Academy of Family Physicians <http://www.aafp.org/afp/2002/0215/p635.html>
- 3) UpToDate. Search: “Patient Information: Headache in children and Migraine in children (The Basics)”. www.uptodate.com