

Important Information for Teens Who Get Headaches

Guidelines for Teens



A headache is not a disease, but it may indicate that something is wrong. Headaches are common among teenagers and generally are not serious. In fact, 50% to 75% of all teens report having at least one headache per month. However, more frequent headaches can be upsetting and worrisome for you and your family. The most common headaches for teenagers are tension headaches and migraines. Sometimes these problems may be associated with health concerns that require a visit to your pediatrician.

What causes headaches?

Headaches are most commonly caused by:

Illness—Headaches often are a symptom of other illnesses. Viral infections, strep throat, allergies, sinus infections, and urinary tract infections can be accompanied by headaches. Fever may also be associated with headaches.

Skipping meals—Even if you're trying to lose weight, you still need to eat regularly. Fad diets can make you hungry and also can give you a headache. Not getting enough fluids—which leads to dehydration—also may cause a headache.

Drugs—Alcohol, cocaine, amphetamines, diet pills, and other drugs may give you a headache.

Often headaches are triggered by sleep problems, minor head injuries, or certain foods (dairy products, chocolate, food additives like nitrates, nitrites, and monosodium glutamate).

Sometimes, headaches can also be caused by prescribed medication, such as birth control pills, tetracycline for acne, and high doses of vitamin A.

Less commonly, headaches can be caused by a dental infection or abscess, and jaw alignment problems (TMJ syndrome). Although headaches are only rarely caused by eye problems, pain around the eyes—which can feel like a headache—can be caused by eye muscle imbalance or not wearing glasses that have been prescribed for you.

Only in **very** rare cases are headaches a symptom of a brain tumor, high blood pressure, or other serious problem.

Types of headaches

Tension headaches often feel like a tight band is around your head. The pain is dull and aching and usually will be felt on both sides of your head, but may be in front and back as well.

Pressure at school or at home, arguments with parents or friends, having too much to do, and feeling anxious or depressed can all cause a headache.

Migraines often are described as throbbing and usually are felt on only one side of your head, but may be felt on both. A migraine may make you feel light-headed or dizzy, and/or make your stomach upset. You may see spots or be sensitive to light, sounds, and smells. If you get migraines, chances are one of your parents or other family members also have had this problem.

A third, less common, type of headache is called a **psychogenic** headache. Psychogenic headaches are similar to tension headaches, but the cause is an emotional problem such as depression. Signs of depression include loss of energy, poor appetite or overeating, loss of interest in usual activities, change in sleeping patterns (trouble falling asleep, waking in the middle of the night or too early in the morning), and difficulty thinking or concentrating.

When should I see the pediatrician?

If you are worried about your headaches—or if this problem begins to disrupt your school, home, or social life—see your pediatrician. Other signs that may mean you should visit your pediatrician include:

Head injury—Headaches from a recent head injury should be checked right away—especially if you were knocked out by the injury.

Seizures/convulsions—Any headaches associated with seizures or fainting require immediate attention.

Frequency—You get more than one headache a week.

Degree of pain—Headache pain is severe and prevents you from doing activities you want to do.

Time of attack—Headaches that wake you from sleep or occur in early morning.

Visual difficulties—Headaches that cause blurred vision, eye spots, or other visual changes.

Other associated symptoms—If fever, vomiting, stiff neck, toothache, or jaw pain accompany your headache, you may require an examination—including laboratory or x-ray tests.

How are headaches treated?

Whichever type of headache you get, and whatever the cause, your pediatrician can explain why you get headaches and how they can be controlled. Be sure to ask any questions you may have.

If you get tension headaches or mild migraines, your pediatrician may suggest an aspirin or an aspirin substitute, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen, and rest. If you get more severe headaches or classic migraines (when you have a visual disturbance called an “aura”), prescription medicine may be required. Your pediatrician may suggest that you keep a **headache diary** to help pinpoint information about what is causing the headaches. A headache diary helps you keep track of the following: when headaches occur, how long they last, what you were doing when the headaches start, what you had eaten, how much sleep you have had, and what seems to make the headaches better or worse.

If what you eat seems to trigger your headaches, your pediatrician will suggest that you eliminate certain foods from your diet. If stress is the culprit, your doctor can help you cope by suggesting special treatments such as relaxation exercises. Headaches that are caused by an emotional or psychological problem may require additional visits to your pediatrician or to other health care professionals to get to the cause of the problem. Sometimes entire families need counseling to eliminate the stress that is causing headaches.

It's important to know that, whatever the cause, headache pain is real. More importantly, with your pediatrician's help, you can identify the source of your headaches and get this problem under control.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

