

# All About HEADACHES

## WHAT CAUSES HEADACHES?

There are a multitude of reasons why kids get headaches. Headaches can be triggered by factors such as:

- Genetic predisposition
- Emotional factors such as increased stress, anxiety, or depression
- Lifestyle factors such as dehydration, skipped meals, or disrupted sleep schedules
- Illness or infection

While there is a definite link between the above factors and headaches, a defined cause is not always identified.

## TYPES OF HEADACHES

The most common types of headaches in children include migraines, tension-type headaches, and chronic headaches. Each type of headache has unique causes and symptoms.

### Migraines

- Migraines are typically more severe headaches that can last up to 72 hours or longer. The pain can be intense and may affect one or both sides of the head. The pain is commonly accompanied by other symptoms such as nausea or vomiting, light, sound or smell sensitivity, visual symptoms, dizziness, or vertigo.
- Migraines can occur with or without a preceding aura. An aura typically occurs 30 minutes to an hour before the onset of migraine pain and can be characterized by a variety of symptoms such as blind spots, seeing flashes of light or zig zag lines, feeling a “pins and needles” sensation, numbness, tingling, or having difficulty speaking.

### Tension-Type Headaches

- Tension-type headaches generally cause mild to moderate pain that may feel like a tight band around the head. These typically are not as long lasting as migraines and usually do not cause nausea and vomiting. Episodes can often be triggered by increased stress or poor posture.

### Chronic Headaches

- Chronic headaches occur 15 or more days per month for three months or longer. Migraines and tension-type headaches can become chronic headaches over time if untreated or under-treated.



## WHAT TO DO IF MY CHILD HAS A HEADACHE?

The following strategies may be helpful for initial treatment when your child has a headache:

**STEP 1:** Hydrate with water.

**STEP 2:** Eat a snack.

**STEP 3:** Lie down in a dark, quiet room to rest.

**STEP 4:** Use a cold or warm compress on the head.

**STEP 5:** Treat with a weight-appropriate dose of over-the-counter pain reliever medication such as Advil/Motrin, Aleve, or Tylenol.

**NOTE:** It is important to avoid using over-the-counter medications too frequently as this can lead to rebound headaches. Limit use to no more than 2-3 doses per week.



## HOW TO PREVENT HEADACHES

Addressing the triggers/causes can lead to a reduction in the frequency of your child's headaches.

### 1. Avoid triggers.

Certain dietary, environmental, and lifestyle factors may be identified as possible triggers for headaches. These may include:

- Dietary: Caffeine, artificial sweeteners, MSG, nitrates/nitrites, tyramine (found in aged cheese, cured meats), chocolate, artificial coloring
- Environmental: Certain odors, allergens, changes in barometric pressure
- Psychological/Lifestyle: Stress, anxiety, depression, irregular eating habits, irregular sleep habits, dehydration, illness

### 2. Fluids

Drinking adequate water throughout the day can both prevent and help treat acute headaches. The recommended daily amount of water varies for age, but a general rule of thumb is to drink approx. 1 oz of water for each pound your child weighs per day. For example, a 50-lb child would aim to drink 40-50 oz per day. Avoid beverages such as juice, soda, tea, coffee, or energy drinks.

### 3. Sleep

Most children need an average of 9 to 10 hours of sleep each night. Going to bed at the same time and waking at the same time each day can be helpful for headache prevention.

### 4. Nutrition

Consume balanced meals at regular hours and do not skip meals. Triggers are different for everyone but skipping meals or fasting has been linked to increased headache frequency. Possible food triggers may include but are not limited to aged cheese, artificial sweeteners, caffeine, chocolate, cured meats (packaged lunchmeats, sausage, pepperoni), canned soup, MSG, nuts, onions, and salty foods.

### 5. Supplements

Over-the-counter supplements such as magnesium or riboflavin (B2) can be beneficial for headache prevention.

- Magnesium Oxide: A dose of 200-250 mg once or twice a day is appropriate for younger children (<10 years old), while older children

may benefit from 400-500 mg once or twice a day. Magnesium comes in a variety of forms including gummies, powdered, tablets, and capsules. The most common side effect is loose stools. If this occurs, decrease to a lower dose.

- Riboflavin (B2): A dose of 200 mg daily is appropriate for younger children (<10 years old) while older children may benefit from 200-400 mg daily. Riboflavin is generally well tolerated with minimal side effects, however patients taking riboflavin may experience brightly colored urine which is normal. Riboflavin typically only comes in tablets or capsules which can make administration difficult in younger children.

### 6. Exercise/stretching

At least 30-45 minutes of aerobic activity and 5-10 minutes of stretching is recommended every day to help prevent headaches. Aerobic activity can include soccer, dancing, swimming, or any activity that gets your heart pumping.

### 7. Stress

Stress is a significant headache trigger. Consider stress management techniques, counseling, or relaxation techniques. Helpful apps for stress management include Calm, Headspace, The Mindfulness App, or Pocket yoga.

### 8. Electronics use

Try to limit electronic use/screen time to no more than two hours of non-academic computer time per day and remove all screen time one hour prior to bed.

## WHAT IF MY CHILD ISN'T GETTING BETTER?

If you feel like your child's headaches are not improving, keep track of your child's symptoms and share them with your healthcare provider. You may need to take your child to see a specialist experienced in treating headaches in children.

