



Headache

Whether they're pounding and throbbing or dull and aching, headaches are no picnic for kids. A lot of the time, they're caused by something simple - such as staying up too late, playing in the sun too long, or taking a bump to the head. But sometimes, headaches last longer or are accompanied by other symptoms.

Headaches can have a wide range of causes and many levels of severity. It's important to understand how to recognize when a headache is just a passing pain, and when it's something more and your child needs medical treatment.

What's a Headache?

Most headaches happen outside the skull, in the nerves, blood vessels, and muscles that cover the head and neck. The muscles or blood vessels can swell, tighten, or go through other changes that stimulate or put pressure on the surrounding nerves.

These nerves send a rush of pain messages to the brain, which brings on a headache.

What Causes Headaches?

In general, kids get the same types of headaches as adults. And headaches often are hereditary, so if you or your partner get them, your child may get them too. Some of the many potential headache triggers include:

- certain medications (headaches are a potential side effect of some)
- too little sleep or sudden changes in sleep patterns
- skipping meals
- becoming dehydrated
- being under a lot of stress
- having a minor head injury
- using the computer or watching TV for a long time
- menstruation
- experiencing changes in hormone levels
- taking a long trip in a car or bus
- listening to really loud music
- smoking
- smelling strong odors such as perfume, smoke, fumes, or a new car or carpet
- drinking or eating too much caffeine (in soda, coffee, tea, and chocolate)
- consuming certain foods (such as alcohol, cheese, pizza, chocolate, ice cream, fatty or fried food, lunchmeats, hot dogs, yogurt, aspartame, or anything with the seasoning MSG)

In some cases, headaches are caused by certain infections, such as:

- ear infections
- flu
- Lyme disease
- sinus infections
- strep throat
- urinary tract infections

But most headaches aren't signs that something more is wrong. Only 10% of headaches are caused by other medical conditions, such as infections or other serious illnesses.

What Are the Common Types of Headaches?

Two of the more common kinds of headaches that kids get are tension headaches and migraines.

Tension Headaches

Fairly common in kids, tension headaches (also called muscle-contraction headaches) are caused by tension in the muscles of the neck and head, which can be brought on by a variety of emotional and physical stressors. The pain is often described as:

constant pressure around the front, top, and sides of the head, almost like someone stretched a rubber band around it constricting dull aching A major distinction between tension headaches and migraines is that tension headaches typically are not accompanied by nausea or vomiting, and they're usually not made worse by physical activity - symptoms that do often occur with migraines.

Migraines

About 5% of school-age kids and up to 10% of teens get migraine headaches, recurrent headaches with additional symptoms. Often triggered by things like stress, sleep deprivation, and certain foods and beverages, migraine headaches can cause the following symptoms: pounding, throbbing pain on one or both sides of the head dizziness stomachaches nausea and/or vomiting seeing spots or halos sensitivity to light, noise, and/or smells

When Should I Call My Child's Doctor?

When your child has a splitting headache, it's easy to worry. Rest assured, though, that only very rarely are headaches a symptom of something serious. However, you should see your child's doctor if your child has unexplained or recurring headaches over a short period of time or on a regular basis.

Call your the doctor if your child's headaches:

- occur once a month or more
- don't go away easily
- are particularly painful

Another factor to consider is whether or not there are other symptoms along with the headaches. If your child is perfectly well between the headaches, this is less cause for concern. If not, then there's more cause for concern - symptoms associated with the headaches themselves can help your child's doctor identify what might be causing the headaches.

Other than nausea, which is common with migraine or tension headaches, you should call child's doctor if your child also has any of the following symptoms:

- decreased level of alertness
- vomiting
- headache when your child wakes up, or one that actually wakes up your child
- headache following a head injury or loss of consciousness
- headache accompanied by seizures
- visual changes
- tingling sensations
- weakness
- skin rash
- difficulty walking or standing
- neck pain or stiffness
- fever or other signs of infection
- unable to go to school or participate in everyday routines and activities