

Understanding headaches in children

There are two basic types of headaches: primary and secondary. Tension-type headaches and migraines are the most common type of primary headaches. Secondary headaches are caused by conditions such as an infection or injury, and usually go away once the condition is treated.



Symptoms

Tension headaches

- Starts slowly, lasts from 30 minutes to a week
- Dull, squeezing pain on both sides of the head
- Mild to moderate in intensity
- Intensity does not increase with activity
- Tension in the back part of the head or neck

Migraines

- Lasts anywhere from one to 48 hours
- Throbbing pain on one side of the head
- Moderate to severe in intensity
- Intensity increases with activity
- Nausea/vomiting
- Sensitivity to light/sound

Diagnosis and treatment

To determine the type of headache, your doctor will perform a physical and neurological exam. You will also discuss any family history of headaches, your child's lifestyle habits and details about their headache (location, duration, triggers, etc.). In complex cases, brain imaging tests may be recommended.

Primary headaches are commonly caused by dehydration, hunger, sleep deprivation, caffeine or hormonal changes. Treatment may include changes in sleep habits, eating patterns or fluid intake. Stress-reduction techniques (mindfulness or yoga) may also be helpful. If headaches worsen or interfere with regular activities, your child may be referred to a neurologist for advanced care.



By the age of 18, more than 90% of children and adolescents will experience at least one headache.



Importance of healthy lifestyle habits

Restful sleep, a healthy diet and regular physical activity are crucial to a child's overall health and development. Children should be sleeping eight to 10 hours each night. Throughout the day, they should eat small, frequent meals, drink plenty of water and participate in physical activity.

