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Paediatric headache:
information about headaches in children and when to get help



Information for parents and carers

What is this information about?

This information is about headaches in children.

It explains:

- the most usual causes and types of headaches
- how you can help your child to avoid getting headaches or to get them less often or less severely
- how to keep a headache diary
- what to look out for at home
- when to get urgent medical help.

Why have I been given this information?

You have been given this information because your child has come into A&E with a headache. It is usual for children to get headaches and there are many things which can cause them. Most headaches are not serious and often improve with healthy habits. This information can help you to recognise the types, causes and symptoms of headaches and help you to manage your child's headaches.

What causes headaches and how can I help?

Many parents worry that headaches are a sign of a brain tumour, but this is a rare cause. You can find more information and check your child's symptoms at:

Better safe then tumour www.bettersafethantumour.com (formally known as HeadSmart).

If you are still worried, please don't be afraid to tell your child's nurse or doctor your concerns, especially if your child's symptoms are changing.

Common reasons for children to have headaches include:

- **not getting enough sleep.** This can cause headaches or make them worse. Try to keep to a regular bedtime routine for your child and avoid them having screen time in the hour before they go to bed.
- **looking at screens** (television, phone, tablet or computer) for a long time can cause headaches or make them worse. Try to limit screen time, especially at bedtime.
- **skipping meals, not drinking enough, or having a lot of processed foods and drinks.** Try to make sure your child eats and drinks regularly.
- **emotional problems and stress,** such as problems at school or changes at home, can be a major cause of headaches, especially as children get older.
- **eyesight problems** can cause headaches, so it is important to have your child's eyes checked. Eye checks are free for children under 16.
- **teeth grinding.** If your child grinds their teeth at night or wakes with a headache and facial pain, it may help to see a dentist.

What are the most usual types of headache?

Tension headache

Tension headaches happen because of tightness in the muscles around the head. They usually cause pain in a band across the forehead. The pain often gets worse during the day and may last for a few days.

Migraine

Migraines affect around 1 in 7 people and often run in families. Adults often get migraine pain on one side of the head, but many children get pain on both sides.

There are many types of migraine. Common types include migraine with aura and migraine without aura. An aura is a group of symptoms that can affect eyesight, speech and sensation. Examples include flashing lights, blind spots, numbness and tingling.

Your child may become more sensitive to bright lights and loud noises. They may feel sick or be sick. They may also have mood changes before and after the headache.

Medication overuse headache

Medicines such as paracetamol and ibuprofen can help control your child's pain, but it is important not to use them too often.

Sometimes using painkillers too often can lead to a daily headache called medication overuse headache. This usually only gets better when your child has a break from the medicine. The chance of getting this type of headache is higher if painkillers are used on at least 10 days each month for 3 months or more.

How can a headache diary help?

Keeping a diary can help identify the type of headache and possible triggers. **You may find it useful to record:**

- where the headache was, such as at the back of the head, on one side or in a band
- whether your child had a red or watery eye, or whether their eyesight was affected
- whether your child had other symptoms, such as being sick, a fever or a runny nose
- what happened before the headache, such as exams, a missed meal or staying up late
- what made the pain better, such as drinking plenty of fluids, eating or sleeping
- what made the pain worse, such as bright light or loud noises.

What should I look out for at home?

If your child has any of the following, they should see a nurse or doctor today.

Do please contact your child's GP surgery or call **NHS 111:**

- headaches that wake them during the night or early in the morning
- a headache that gets worse when they bend forwards or strain
- changes to their eyesight
- sudden changes in behaviour or problems remembering things
- feeling sick or being sick often
- new balance or coordination problems, or unsteadiness
- holding their head or neck in an unusual position.

When should I bring my child back into hospital?

If your child has any of the following, do phone 999 for an ambulance or go straight to the nearest A&E (Emergency Department):

- **a sudden severe headache**
- **a fever with a headache and neck stiffness**
- **a rash that does not fade when you press a glass against it**
- **a fit or seizure**
- **abnormal drowsiness or confusion**

Useful contacts

Practice Plus

Brighton walk-in centre and GP service
0300 130 3333 / 0333 321 0946

7 days a week
8.00am to 8.00pm
Brighton walk-in centre GP service
www.practiceplusbrightonstation.nhs.uk

Out of Hours GP Service NHS 111

Be aware,

CED staff will not be able to give you medical advice for your child over the phone but can direct you to the right service to help you.

Children's Emergency Department (CED),

Royal Alexandra Children's Hospital
01273 696955 Ext. 62593

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