

HEADACHES IN CHILDHOOD

Headaches are extremely common in childhood. The majority of headaches are harmless, although they may cause an interruption in the child's functioning. This pamphlet will discuss common pediatric headaches.

MIGRAINE HEADACHES

Migraines are often described as pounding or throbbing. They may be predominantly on one side or the other, and may switch sides. They start out as small headaches and grow in intensity over a few minutes to a few hours, and may be accompanied by nausea and vomiting. Some people have an "aura" or a warning sign that the headache is coming, such as spots in the eyes. Migraines are usually relieved by sleep and may be worse with noise or bright light.

Migraine headaches commonly run in families. Motion sickness and "ice cream headaches" (from eating very cold foods) are also frequent in families with migraines.

Some patients have migraines triggered by certain things: hormones, caffeine, drugs, alcohol, irregular sleeping habits, skipping meals, stress, or foods such as aged cheese, chocolate, MSG, red wine, or nitrites (lunchmeat preservatives). Minor Trauma may also bring on a migraine. Often, there is no specific trigger identified.

Treatment depends upon frequency and intensity. Tylenol or ibuprofen relieves most migraines, but headaches that require medication on three or more days a week need further evaluation at an office visit. Caffeine may bring on a migraine, but may also bring relief once the headache has started (Excedrin Migraine Formula contains caffeine.) Daily preventive medications can help children whose migraines are frequent or severe. Biofeedback can be very beneficial in controlling migraines. Vitamin B2 may be helpful. Since herbal remedies have not been studied for safety, we do not recommend them.

TENSION HEADACHE

Tension headaches are described as squeezing or band-like and may extend to the back of the head or neck area. They are common in school-aged children and are caused by muscle contraction. Sitting at a computer terminal or holding the head in any one position for a long time can bring on tension headaches. Heat and massage usually relieve them.

OTHER HEADACHES

Serious problems with the brain may result in headaches, although they are uncommon.

Hemorrhages are extremely sudden in onset and extremely severe – “the worst headache of my life.” The person may be fine one moment and overcome the next. This headache requires emergency attention.

Brain tumors cause headaches as well. Straining or bending may bring on this type of headache. (Any headache can be made worse by straining or bending.) Vomiting, especially in the morning, may occur. The headache may be at its worst in the morning and get better as the day goes by (the opposite of most headaches) and lying down may make the headache worse.

Meningitis may cause headaches and any headache with fever and/or stiff neck should be evaluated urgently.

SUMMARY

The overwhelming majority of childhood headaches are harmless. If headaches are a problem for your child, we will help you get control of the problem and minimize the impact of the headaches on your child’s life.