



## Patient education: Headaches in children (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

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### What types of headaches do children get?

Headaches are common in children. Two of the most common types of headaches in children are:

- **Tension-type headaches** – Tension-type headaches cause pressure or tightness on both the left and right sides of the head. Tension headaches are usually not severe enough to keep children from doing their daily activities, such as going to school.
- **Migraines** – Migraines often start off mild and then get worse. They might affect just 1 side of the head or both. They can cause your child to feel sick or vomit, or make your child sensitive to light and sound. They can also cause temporary problems with vision. For example, before getting a migraine, some children see spots or colored lights. When they have a migraine, children are often not able to do their normal daily activities, such as go to school.

Children also tend to get headaches that go along with a cold, the flu, a sore throat, or a sinus infection.

In rare cases headaches in children are caused by a serious infection (such as meningitis), severe high blood pressure, or brain tumors.

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### Should my child see a doctor or a nurse?

You should take your child to the doctor right away (without giving any medicine) if they have a headache that:

- Starts after a head injury
- Wakes them up

- Is sudden and severe and happens with other symptoms, such as:
  - Vomiting
  - Neck pain or stiffness
  - Double vision or changes in vision
  - Confusion
  - Loss of balance
  - Fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher

You should also take your child to see a doctor or nurse if they:

- Get headaches more than once a month
- Have a headache and is younger than 6 years old
- Have a headache and has certain medical conditions, such as sickle cell disease, bleeding problems, immune system problems, genetic problems, heart problems, or cancer

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## Is there anything I can do on my own to help my child feel better?

Yes. If your child does not need to see a doctor or nurse, you can do these things:

- If possible, have your child rest in a quiet dark space with a cool cloth on their forehead.
- Encourage your child to sleep, if they want to. Sleep can help, especially with migraines.
- Give your child pain medicine, such as children's [acetaminophen](#) (sample brand name: Tylenol) or children's [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin). Never give your child [aspirin](#). In children, aspirin can cause a life-threatening condition called Reye syndrome.

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## Are there tests my child should have?

Probably not. Most headaches in children are not caused by a serious problem.

Your child's doctor or nurse will probably be able to tell what is wrong with your child by doing an exam and by learning about their symptoms. But if your child's doctor or nurse suspects a serious infection or problem, they might order an imaging test such as an MRI or a CT scan. Imaging tests create images of the inside of the body.

## How are headaches in children treated?

There are many types of medicines used to treat and to prevent headaches. Your child's doctor or nurse will talk with you about which medicine, if any, would work best for your child.

## Is there anything I can do to keep my child from getting headaches?

Yes. Some headaches can be triggered by certain foods or things that children do. Keep a "headache diary" for your child. In the diary, write down every time your child has a headache and what they ate and did before it started. That way, you can find out if there is anything they should avoid.

Some common headache triggers are:

- Skipping meals
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Having too little or too much caffeine
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Stress
- Certain foods, such as bologna or hot dogs

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[Patient education: Head injury in children and adolescents \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Meningitis in children \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Headaches in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Headache in children \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Headache causes and diagnosis in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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