



HEADACHE

Over half of children older than five years and most adolescents and adults have occasional headaches.

The most common causes of headaches in young people are minor infectious illnesses and muscle tension. Most any type of cold, sore throat, "stomach flu", etc. can be accompanied by a headache. The discomfort can usually be relieved with acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol) and rest. It does not usually mean that a sinus infection or other more serious complication is present. However, if the headache is accompanied by a high fever, vomiting, or a stiff neck, please call our advice nurse.

The pain of a muscle (or "tension") headache is caused by persistent involuntary contraction of the muscles of the back of the neck and forehead. It is usually a constant, dull pain that covers the entire forehead. Most everyone has an occasional tension headache after a "bad day" but frequent or long lasting tension headaches may indicate that a child is overly nervous, anxious, worried, or upset. This may mean either an abundance of stress in the child's life, or, it may mean that the child has not learned how to cope with "normal" amounts of everyday stress.

Common sources of stress for children include parental fighting, divorce, remarriage, death of a close relative, friend, or pet, new sibling, recent move, school problems, bullies, etc. Encourage your child to talk about what bothers her. Be honest in your discussions. A trip to the local library or bookstore may afford some appropriate reading for the parent and/or child about the particular problem. Sometimes professional help is needed. Your pediatrician may be able to direct you to appropriate reading material or refer the child to a mental health professional if indicated.

A "healthy lifestyle" also usually helps reduce the frequency of tension headaches. Make sure that your child is getting enough sleep, eating a balanced diet, and not skipping meals. The average school aged child should be getting 10-12 hours of sleep a night, and teens 9-10 hours in order to function at their best. Decrease the amount of time spent in front of the TV and video games and replace it with vigorous exercise or quiet time spent reading. For older children, learning meditation, yoga, or self-hypnosis often affords relief.

It is often helpful to keep a diary of the headaches. Writing down the time and date of each headache along with what activity, food, or location preceded the onset of the pain may help to pinpoint the headache's trigger. Aside from stress as mentioned above, other causes include noise, bright lights, excessive heat, poor ventilation, poor illumination, irritating odors, disturbed sleep, tooth grinding, menstrual periods, abscessed teeth, impacted wisdom teeth, fatigue, or hunger.

Rarely, headaches can be caused by more serious medical problems. If you have followed the above advice and have not found a cause and if Tylenol or other over the counter medications do not relieve your child's headaches, make another appointment with the pediatrician. If the headaches are accompanied by vomiting, regularly are present upon first awakening in the morning, or if the child shows any clumsiness or unusual changes in behavior, please call for an appointment right away.