

Let's Talk ABOUT...

Almost everyone experiences headaches. Headaches are common in children and have many causes and levels of severity. When headaches are constant (e.g., your child wakes up with a headache, and it continues through the day) they are **chronic daily headaches**. These occur daily, often for months or years. They can be a concerning and disabling problem for children and families. The pain is often described as constant pressure around the sides of the head, constricting, dull, and aching.

What causes a headache?

The brain cannot “feel” pain. The brain does not have nerve endings (pain sensors) like you have in your fingers or toes. However, there are pain sensors in the blood vessels inside and around the brain and in the tissues that cover the brain. The person experiences a headache if these pain sensors get irritated. Continuous painful contractions of the scalp muscles can also cause a headache.

What causes chronic daily headaches?

Chronic daily headaches often begin with an event that significantly changes a child's daily routine. This can be an illness, an injury, or a major family stress. Adolescents who are perfectionists or have parents with high expectations may be more likely to develop chronic daily headaches. Depression can be the cause or the result of chronic daily headaches. Parents should look for signs of depression in their child. Signs of depression include poor sleep habits, excessive weight loss or gain, anger, declining school performance, or withdrawing from friends and family. If they understand events that cause headaches, then parents, teachers and friends can support children when these events occur.

Often, chronic daily headaches are the result of a “vicious cycle” in which many things combine and

Headaches, chronic daily

cause headaches. First a trigger happens that starts the headache process. Headache pain causes stress and tension which may cause painful neck and scalp muscle tightening. This makes the pain worse and interrupts the child's sleep. Without proper rest, the problem gets worse. So, most children with chronic daily headaches do not feel well, do not stay active, cannot concentrate, and school becomes stressful and challenging. All of this feeds into the vicious cycle.

How will the doctor diagnose my child's headaches?

A pediatric neurologist will evaluate your child. This includes a history and physical examination. They may also order tests to look for what may be causing the headaches. These may include blood or urine tests, a CT scan, or an MRI of the brain. Usually, the child does not have a serious medical condition.

How will the doctor treat my child's headaches?

Treatment will try to break the chronic daily headache cycle. The first step is to make some healthy lifestyle changes. Without these basic health measures, other treatments may not work. Your child should:

- Drink lots of liquids and eat a balanced diet with healthy meals three times a day.
- Take part in enjoyable physical activity for at least 30 minutes a day. Some examples are walking, hiking, playing sports, or swimming.
- Get the proper amount of sleep (minimum of 8 hours). This is important. Lack of proper sleep often triggers headaches.

The next step is to recognize and avoid triggers that cause your child's headaches. Sometimes triggers are

not obvious and cannot be identified. To help figure out what triggers your child's headaches, doctors often ask parents and older kids and teens to keep a headache diary. This will show you when the headaches happen, how long they last, and what may trigger them.

Treatment plans often start with "rescue" (interruptive) medications. These medicines work best when given as early as possible after the headache starts. The longer a headache lasts, the harder it is to stop. Ask your child's primary care doctor to provide a letter for the school so your child can receive rescue medicine as soon as the headache starts.

A daily medicine to prevent headaches may be helpful. Your child's doctor will consider how often the headaches happen. The doctor will discuss with you the medicine's possible benefit and side effects.

Non-medication or complementary treatments often help treat or lessen the headaches. These include relaxation training, massage, physical therapy, biofeedback, self-hypnosis, and imagery therapy.

A psychologist or psychiatrist can help identify depression or find a learning disability or life stress that may cause your child's headaches. Chronic daily headache can actually cause stress or anxiety as well. Encourage your child to go to school whenever possible. Attending school is an important part of successful headache treatment.

Headaches are rarely a sign of something serious but you should seek medical attention if the headache:

- Is particularly painful and different from other headaches
- Doesn't go away
- Follows an injury, such as your child hits his head

You should also see a doctor if your child has any of the following with their headache:

- Changes in vision, such as blurriness or seeing spots
- Tingling sensations
- Weakness, dizziness, or difficulty walking
- Neck pain or stiffness
- Fever

Treatment can be challenging. You and your doctors must work together to find the best approach. Families may give up too quickly when the treatments do not work right away. Often you have to give a treatment the chance to work. It is important to be patient and to "hang in there" with treatments that might help over time. With good health measures, a consistent treatment plan, and the child, family and doctor working together, most children will recover from their headaches.