Let's Talk About...

Headache treatment in the hospital

Constant, severe headaches can be disabling for children. If treatment at home does not work, your child's health care provider may recommend headache treatment in the hospital. This handout talks about what you and your child may experience in the hospital. Before bringing your child to the hospital talk with your child's doctor. Talk to them about your situation and discuss any changes they recommend.

What arrangements do I have to make?

Your child's doctor will probably arrange your child's admission to the hospital before you get there. This is to "preauthorize" (approve) your insurance for the time in the hospital. It also gives you time to arrange for school, child care, and work while your child is in the hospital. Some medicines your child takes at home may interact with medicines in the hospital. Ask your child's doctor if you should continue your child's current medicines.

How will they treat my child's headaches in the hospital?

Depending on your situation, your child's doctor may recommend one of several headache medicines. Some possible medicines are DHE, ketorolac, medicines to treat nausea or vomiting, chlorpromazine, or other medicine. Usually these medicines make the headache less severe, but they do not cure headaches. The goal in the hospital is to make headaches less severe so other treatments work better. While the positive effect of hospital treatment may last after your child goes home, other things will help, too. These include attention to your child's mental health, school needs, and outpatient (clinic) treatment. These are critical to help with the headaches.

Intravenous line and medication

In the hospital, headache medicine is usually given in an intravenous catheter (IV). An IV is a small tube placed into a vein. Your child will probably get an IV as soon as he is admitted to the hospital. IVs usually last 1-2 days. The IV may need to be replaced (put in again) while your child is in the hospital. Some children receive a longer-lasting IV called a PICC line. Your child may need light sedation if he receives a PICC line. If he receives sedation, your child cannot eat or drink for several hours before the sedation.

Activity

Severe headaches are a disabling medical problem and rest is important for the brain to recover. While your child is in the hospital for headache treatment, he will rest quietly in a darkened room. He will not be allowed television, video games, phone calls, or texting. Your immediate family can visit, but no-one else. Your child will be able to read, listen to quiet music, and have conversations. The hospital staffs will encourage him to rest.

Sleep

Restful sleep is a very important to recover from severe headaches. While your child is in the hospital, it is as quiet as possible and the staff will interrupt your child's sleep as little as possible.

Other consulting services

One advantage of being in the hospital is there are other doctors and services that can help your child. These include behavioral health (psychologists or psychiatrists), integrative medicine, physical therapy, nutrition, and education. During most headache admissions, these providers will evaluate your child to make sure he has a complete headache

management plan. Often these providers' recommendations help headaches the most. They may also help you and your child cope with the headache problem, particularly after your child goes home.

What will happen when my child goes home?

Hospital headache treatment is very helpful, but is not an immediate cure. The full effect may not happen for several weeks after being in the hospital. Sometimes, headaches get worse during or after being in the hospital. For many children, headaches get better and worse over time. To make sure your child's headache management works, follow the instructions you receive while your child is in the hospital. It is important that you coordinate your child's care plan and follow-up with your child's primary care provider and the specialists. When your child goes home, schedule a follow-up visit with your child's doctor.

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