

Let's Talk About...

Chronic Daily Headaches

What are chronic daily headaches?

A headache is pain in the area of the head. Headaches are common in children and have many causes, symptoms, and levels of severity. If your child has daily headaches over a period of 3 months or longer, the headaches are considered to be **chronic daily headaches**. They can be a concerning and disabling problem for children and families.

What causes a headache?

Pain from a headache is not actually coming from the brain. Most headaches involve pain-sensing nerve endings in muscles and blood vessels in your head and neck. A person experiences a headache if these nerve endings get irritated, which can happen for many reasons.

Why does my child have chronic daily headaches?

Chronic daily headaches often begin with an event that changes a child's daily routine, such as:

- **Stress.** This can be stress from a family change, such as divorce or moving, or stress to perform well in school.
- **Depression.** Depression is a long-lasting or persistent feeling of sadness that interferes with everyday life. Depression can be both a cause and result of chronic daily headaches.
- **Illness or injury,** especially an injury to the head.
- **Medication use.** Some medicines have headaches as a side effect. Also, long-term use of pain medication (like those used to treat headaches) can cause **rebound headaches** or **medication overuse headaches**. This can result in headaches that come back stronger and last longer.



However, with chronic daily headaches, there may not be one specific cause. Several problems can combine to cause daily headaches. For example, a trigger starts the headache. Pain then causes tension or tightening in the muscles around the neck and scalp. This makes the headache pain worse, which may interrupt sleep, affect mood or ability to concentrate, and stop the child from being active. This all feeds into a cycle, which can make it hard to treat the headaches.

How will the doctor diagnose my child's headaches?

Most headaches, even chronic daily headaches, are not caused by serious health conditions. Even so, a pediatric neurologist [new-ROL-uh-jist] (a doctor that specializes in problems of the brain and nerves) will evaluate your child. The doctor will do a physical exam, ask questions, and may order tests to look for a potential cause of the headaches. These tests may include blood or urine tests as well as imaging tests of the head using a CT scan or MRI.

How are chronic daily headaches treated?

The goal of treatment is to break the cycle of daily headaches. Treatment may require multiple approaches. Also, the treatments need time to work.

Make lifestyle changes

A healthy lifestyle will help prevent and treat headaches. For example, your child should:

- **Stay hydrated and eat a balanced diet.** Doing so will help ensure the body has the fluids and nutrients it needs to function properly.
- **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.** Children generally need 9 to 12 hours of sleep (depending on their age). This is important — a lack of sleep often triggers or sustains the headaches.
- **Avoid daily medications,** such as ibuprofen, acetaminophen, or other pain pills, which can cause overuse headaches or rebound headaches. Also, some headache medicines contain caffeine. Caffeine consumption by children and teens is discouraged by the American Academy of Pediatrics as it can cause headaches and affect sleep habits.
- **Avoid more than 2 hours of non-educational screen time per day.** This includes movies, video games, and texting.
- **Participate in regular activities** as much as possible. Encourage your child to go to school and to do the things they enjoy.

Learn to relax

Finding ways to relax can help treat or lessen headaches. Treatments include relaxation training, massage, physical therapy, biofeedback, self hypnosis, and imagery therapy.

Use rescue medications

Rescue medications are used to interrupt the headache as they start. These medicines work best when given as early as possible after the headache begins. 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.

Avoid triggers

Recognize and avoid any triggers that cause your child's headaches. Doctors often ask parents and older children or teens to keep a headache diary. This helps identify when the headaches happen, how long they last, and what triggers them.

If your child can identify events that cause headaches, then parents, teachers, and friends can support children when these events occur.

When should I call my doctor?

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 a concussion

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

- Changes in vision, such as double vision or loss of vision
- Weakness, dizziness, or difficulty walking
- Neck stiffness
- Fever

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