

Let's Talk About...

Headaches, Chronic Daily

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) and last more than 3 months, they are considered to be chronic daily headaches. These occur daily, often for many months or years. They can be a concerning and disabling problem for children and families.

What causes a headache?

The brain cannot “feel” pain. The brain does not have nerve endings (pain sensors) like we have in our 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. A 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 (such as a concussion), or a major family stress. Daily use of medications, such as ibuprofen, acetaminophen and others, can lead to a type of chronic headache known as medication overuse headache. 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 children, if they are experiencing chronic headaches. Signs of depression include poor sleep habits, excessive weight loss or gain, anger, declining school performance, or withdrawing from friends and family. If your child can identify the events that

cause headaches, parents, teachers, and friends can support children when these events occur.

Chronic daily headaches can be the result of a “vicious cycle” in which many things combine to cause headaches. First, a trigger starts the headache process. Headache pain then 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 a vicious cycle.

How will the doctor diagnose my child's headaches?

A pediatric neurologist will evaluate your child; this evaluation includes a comprehensive history and thorough physical examination. The neurologist may also order tests to look for a potential cause of the headaches. These may include blood or urine tests, a CT scan of the head, 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?

The goal of treatment is 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 or sustains the headaches.
- Avoid daily medications, such as ibuprofen, acetaminophen, or other pain pills, and excessive caffeine use.
- Avoid more than 2 hours of non-educational screen time (movies, video games, texting, etc.) per day.

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 determine what triggers 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.

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 be contributing to your child’s headaches. Chronic daily headaches can actually cause stress or anxiety as well. Encourage your child to go to school

whenever possible. This is a key part of a successful headache treatment plan.

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

Treatment of chronic daily headaches can be challenging. You and your doctors must work together to find the best approach. Families may give up too soon when the treatments do not work right away. Often you must give a treatment time to work. It is important to be patient and to “hang in there” with treatments that might help over time. Non-medication treatments, such as cognitive behavioral therapy with a psychologist, can be very beneficial. With good health measures, a consistent treatment plan, and collaboration between the child, family and healthcare providers, headaches improve or eventually stop in most children and adolescents.