Headaches in Children and Adolescents

What is a Headache?

A headache is pain or discomfort in the head or face region. The subject of headaches is very complicated as there are so many different types of headaches and so many different causes for this pain; not all of which are completely understood by experts. Headaches can happen at any age and children are often affected. Most frequently in this population, headaches are associated with viral illness or fever. That being said, up to 5% of school-aged children experience a more severe type of headache called a migraine. These types of headaches in children may peak during the teen years and then sometimes can suddenly disappear with the onset of adulthood. Approximately 20% of adolescents experience migraines (affecting females more frequently than males).

What causes Headaches?

There are several triggers for headaches that Doctors can explain, such as: muscle tension, dilation of blood vessels in the brain, hormones, stress, medications, dehydration, and even certain foods can result in this pain. There are researchers that have noted a hereditary link as well in this phenomenon. Tumors, although very rare in children and adolescents, can be a cause as well. First, headaches are grouped into categories.

Types of Headaches

This is just one way to classify headaches, but there are many other ways. This system categorizes them in two ways. There are primary headaches and secondary headaches.

Primary headaches are usually caused by tight muscles or dilated blood vessels. They are considered a condition with no internal, underlying medical cause. Primary headaches include: migraines, tension headaches, and cluster headaches.

Secondary headaches, on the other hand, are the result of some organic cause. Infection, injury to the brain, structural problems within the brain, fever, sinusitis, and high blood pressure are just a few examples of secondary headaches. This type of headache is a symptom of an underlying medical cause.

Is it a Migraine or is it a Headache?

This is an excellent question! The word migraine can get tossed about and over-used. However, we know that the common denominator is pain. It is important to know the difference between migraines and headaches so that your child or adolescent receives the right medical care.
Migraines start with pain on one or both sides of the head. Sometimes younger children will complain of pain all over. The pain may be throbbing or pulsating. Some children will say that they feel their heart beating in their head. Some may complain that light is bothering them. You may notice that your child is not interested in playing outside when normally, that is their favorite activity. Many report nausea or complain of vomiting accompanied by a headache. They may feel sensitive to certain smells. Your child may not be able to verbalize this. Children may report that they are not hungry or show no interest in food at all; even their favorite desserts are not appealing to them. Some children report that noise of any kind is bothering them. They may become pale or quiet all of a sudden. Sometimes, a child will retreat to a quiet, dark room to rest or report that they want to lay down. They may seem irritable and not interested in talking. Lastly, some kids will complain that their vision is blurry, or that they are seeing funny things like flashes, lines or shadows. This is called an aura and sometimes people will have this prior to the onset of a migraine. This aura may last for 20-30 minutes and then the migraine will begin. Migraines can last for 2 hours up to a few days.

What causes Migraine Headaches?

The exact cause(s) of migraines is uncertain, but some experts believe that they have something to do with the way that serotonin (a natural chemical in the brain) can cause blood vessels to constrict or dilate. What researches do know is that migraines can be triggered by certain things, such as: different phases of the menstrual cycle, alcohol, caffeine, MSG (monosodium glutamate), certain foods that have nitrates, chocolate, aged cheeses, stress, lack of sleep, missing meals, loud noises, and changes in weather, altitude or barometric pressure are just some examples.

Tension Headaches

Tension headaches are the most common type of headaches. They are frequently caused by stress, tight muscles in the neck, shoulders, scalp and jaw, anxiety, depression, fatigue, hunger or over-exertion. They occur mostly between the ages of 9 and 12.

The headache’s onset is slow and the pain is usually on both sides. The pain is mild to moderate and may involve the back of the head or neck. Children who experience this type of headache do not have nausea, vomiting, or sensitivity to light and sound.

Cluster Headaches

Cluster headaches are more common in adolescent males and begin after the age 10 years. They occur in a series over a period of weeks or even months sometimes. They may happen once a year or occur seasonally. The pain can come on very suddenly and last a few minutes to a few hours and occur several times in one day.

The pain is usually severe and is felt on one side of the head or behind the eye. Frequently, the affected eye can be red, the eye lid can be swollen or droopy, and the pupil of that eye may even appear to be smaller than that of the unaffected eye. Concurrently, the nose may feel congested and runny.

Some of the following are causes of cluster headaches: certain medications, smoking, alcohol, change in sleep pattern, and any abnormal hormonal fluctuations.
Help for the child or adolescent who suffers from headaches

Medications such as Tylenol and Ibuprofen are helpful. It is important to be mindful that while these medications can relieve headaches, if they are used too frequently, they can cause rebound headaches. If your child is taking or asking for these medicines more than 3 times per week, please consult with your Pediatrician or Family Doctor. Another important remedy for a bad headache is to have your child lay down in a cool, dark room with a wet wash cloth on their forehead. Many times, they will fall into a deep sleep and awaken feeling better.

The best way to approach chronic headaches is figuring out what triggers them. Have your son or daughter keep a headache diary. They should document things like: when the headache started, how long it lasted, what they ate that day, what activities they did that day, what were they doing when the headache began, how much fluids they had that day, how much sleep they got the night before, what part of the head hurts, what other symptoms do they have, if they are female, what day of their cycle are they in (from the perspective of the first day of their last period), are they stressed and lastly, has anything in their routine changed? After reviewing the diary as a parent, notice if there are any patterns and share this diary with your Doctor.

The best way to avoid headaches is the following: Eat regularly (do not miss meals), keep a strict sleep routine, exercise regularly, stretch throughout the day, avoid foods or drinks that are known to trigger headaches (caffeine, monosodium glutamate, aged cheeses, nuts, chocolate, deli meats with nitrates, aspartame, canned soups, and anything pickled), stress management, and keep hydrated. It is very important to become familiar with food labels. Read the ingredients on your foods that you prepare. Many are unaware that a lot of salad dressings contain monosodium glutamate. If you are at a restaurant, ask your waiter if any of the food that your child ordered has monosodium glutamate. Keep in mind, that many waiters do not know that MSG is the same thing as monosodium glutamate. Many foods that seem child-friendly are riddled with monosodium glutamate.

Lastly, if you cannot seem to prevent headaches or if you are concerned about your child’s symptoms, make an appointment with your Doctor. There is an array of diagnostic tools that can help the Physician pinpoint what kind of headaches your son or daughter is having. If your Doctor is unable to find the cause, he or she can refer you to a Neurologist or Headache Specialist who deals with these issues everyday and is specifically trained in this area.