

Nervous System

Headache

More than 40% of all children have had a headache{ XE “headache” } by the age of seven, and 4% of seven year olds are troubled by frequent headaches. By the age of 15, 75% of children will have a headache and 20% will have headaches frequently.

An isolated headache may be due to an earache, sore throat, tooth ache, or eye infection. Even young children may suffer from sinus infections. Serious infections may cause severe headaches along with stiff neck, vomiting, fever and irritability. Meningitis is an important consideration and requires immediate attention by our office or Children’s Hospital emergency room.

Stress must be considered even in younger children as the cause of headache. Five year olds can be effected by stress and tension. Older children have stress as the primary cause of headache. Constant tension on the muscles over the head and along the neck produce a substance causing the pain. Tension headaches can occur in any part of the head with a slow developing dull, full feeling, or pulsating sensation. Headaches may be the first symptom of stressful problems at school, at home or with friends. A child who is functioning poorly in any of these areas may need help.

Many medications, including decongestants and antihistamines can cause headaches. Headache is common just before menstruation. Eyestrain is often blamed but is seldom a cause of headache.

Migraine{ XE “migraine headache” } or vascular headaches{ XE “vascular headaches” } often start in childhood. Some toddlers who vomit may have migraine. As they are grow older and are able to communicate more understandably, headache may be recognized as the precipitator of the vomiting. Children with migraine often have at least two of the following : 1) headache on one side only, 2) nausea, 3) visual changes before a headache, 4) other family members with a migraine headache history. These headache are often throbbing in character and begin quite quickly.

Headaches may be the only sign of a seizure{ XE “seizure” }. These headaches begin suddenly and are followed by a period of drowsiness or sleep.

Many parents are concerned about brain tumors.{ XE “brain tumors” } Headaches associated with brain tumors are usually persistent and worsening. Headaches may awaken children or persist into the morning. I become most concerned when headaches are associated with difficulty with walking, personality changes, weakness in arms or legs, changes in vision or speech, and vomiting. Fortunately brain tumors are rare in children and these symptoms are brought on by other conditions.

The first treatment you may consider is diversion, support, and reassurance. Most headaches disappears in a couple of minutes. When headaches persist disturb sleep or activities you can always safely use aspirin free pain relievers like Tylenol™. If hayfever is suspected as the cause of the problem, antihistamine, decongestant combinations found over the counter work well. Persistent or reoccurring headache may need medical attention especially if associated with other physical signs. *Last reviewed 9/5/2005*