

# Headache in Children and Young People

**This leaflet offers information about headache in children and young people. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to the staff member in charge of your child's care.**

## **What is headache and why has my child got it?**

Headaches are very common. Almost all of us will have had one. Children can have headaches the same as adults but their symptoms may be slightly different and they may not be able to describe them. Most headaches, in adults and children, aren't serious and don't require tests or scans.

There are many different types of headaches. The most common is tension headache but children can also have migraines, of which there are also many different types. In rare cases, headache can be a sign of something else going on in the brain.

Your doctor will assess your child to try to make a diagnosis.

## **What are the signs and symptoms?**

Headache comes in many different forms, at many different times. Your child's doctor will ask some detailed questions to determine the type of headache.

Tension headache tends to feel like a pressing tightness in the head and/or neck, without any other symptoms like feeling sick.

Migraine is normally a throbbing pain in the head, often one sided and made worse by movement, with nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and sensitivity to light or sound.

There may also be other symptoms, e.g. numbness or vision changes.

## **Does my child need any tests to confirm the diagnosis?**

Most children do not need tests and the diagnosis is made on the information you give and what the doctor finds out when examining your child.

Parents often worry about their child having a brain tumour but this is a very rare cause of headache. Your doctor will specifically consider this when they assess your child and think about if a brain scan or other tests are needed.

## **What treatments are available?**

Headache responds best to good simple pain relief medicines, given early on in severe headache. Paracetamol and ibuprofen are generally best, given in the dosages on the packaging. These are safe and effective.

If your doctor feels your child has migraine, then they may suggest a special migraine medicine called sumatriptan. This can be given as a tablet or a nasal spray in older children. It should be given with a pain relief medicine, such as paracetamol. If the migraine is deemed severe enough by your doctor, they may also give anti-sickness medication to your child. Other simple things which can help are:

- Encouraging your child to relax and breathe deeply
- Putting a cool, moist cloth across their forehead or eyes
- Lying them down in a cool, dark, quiet room.

Some children with very frequent migraine may choose to take medicine every day to try to prevent as well as treat their headaches. This needs to be discussed with your doctor, as the medicines all have side effects.

Some older children find guided relaxation and meditation helpful and there are apps that can help with this.

### **What happens if my child does not get treatment?**

Most headaches can be cared for at home or at school. You don't have to give your child medicine every time they have a headache. Taking pain relief every day makes headache worse by causing a medication overuse headache.

Discuss with your doctor and child a plan that works best for your child. Keeping a headache diary can help with this.

### **What should I look out for?**

If your child develops a headache with any of the features below, they should attend A&E without delay.

- **A headache that wakes them at night**
- **A headache that is present on awakening in the morning**
- **A headache that progressively worsens**
- **A headache triggered or aggravated by coughing, sneezing or bending down**
- **A headache with fever and a non-blanching rash, neck stiffness or aversion to bright lights**
- **A headache associated with vomiting**
- **A headache associated with difficulty in balance and/or speech**
- **A headache associated with being abnormally drowsy and difficult to wake up**
- **A headache occurring within five days of a head injury**
- **A headache associated with squint or inability to look upwards.**

## **Is there anything I can do to help my child?**

There may be things that trigger your child's headaches. If you can spot these then you can try to correct them. Keeping a headache diary will help. A good one for all ages is available at:

<https://migrainetrust.org/live-with-migraine/self-management/keeping-a-migraine-diary/>

If your child's headaches could be caused by poor quality sleep, make sure they wind down quietly at night before going to bed. They should never use tablets, phones or computers or watch TV in bed as the light significantly affects sleep.

If the headaches might be caused by skipping meals or not drinking enough, make sure they have a water bottle at school and eat something every mealtime, especially breakfast.

If it could be caused by poor diet, with too much processed sugar, cut down processed foods and sugary drinks and snacks.

If stress and anxiety could be the cause, try to speak to your child about what's worrying them and speak to staff at their school if you need to.

Limit screen time to no more than a couple of hours a day and make sure they take breaks every half hour if loud music or screen time could be a cause.

Finally, if vision problems might be behind the headaches, have your child's eyes checked by an optician.

## **Useful sources of information**

The Migraine Trust has a wealth of resources on headache, see [www.migrainetrust.org](http://www.migrainetrust.org)

Also see:

[www.nhs.uk/Livewell/headaches/Pages/Headachesinchildren.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/headaches/Pages/Headachesinchildren.aspx)  
and <https://www.headsmart.org.uk/>

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about headache in children and young people, please contact the paediatric medicine secretaries on 020 8725 3648 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 4.30pm), giving the name of the doctor you saw, if possible. Out of hours, please leave a voice message.

**For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.stgeorges.nhs.uk](http://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk)**

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## Additional services

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9.30am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough wings (near the lift foyer).

**Tel:** 020 8725 2453 **Email:** [pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk)

### NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health. **Web:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones. **Tel:** 111

## AccessAble

You can download accessibility guides for all our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website ([www.accessable.co.uk](http://www.accessable.co.uk)). The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.



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