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Headache: Getting the Scoop on Headaches, Q and A

Learning to understand what causes headaches is the first step to controlling them.

Are headaches common in teens?

About 6 out of 10 adolescents have an occasional headache. In one study, 1 in 6 teens had frequent tension-type headaches and 1 in 20 teens had migraine.

Is it likely that a teen who gets severe headaches has a brain tumor?

It's not likely at all. The overwhelming majority of headaches are neither serious nor life-threatening. Episodic tension headaches are usually caused by physical factors such as flu, fever, lack of sleep, or emotional factors such as stress. The most common recurring headaches are tension-type and migraine.

How can I tell if my headaches are due to migraine?

Migraine is a strong, pounding headache that returns 2 to 4 times a month. Migraine runs in families. Patients look pale, become quiet, are bothered by light and noise, and wish to lie down. Many lose their appetite and become nauseated; some may vomit. The attacks usually last less than 4 hours and are often relieved by sleep.

How can I tell if my headaches mean that something is really wrong?

If your headaches are getting more frequent and/or more severe over time, if they awaken you from sleep, if they are associated with neurological symptoms (such as a seizure, trouble keeping your balance, visual problems or vomiting) see your pediatrician.

What if someone had headaches almost every school day but not on the weekend?

That sounds like a tension headache, the most common type of episodic headache in teens. We really don't know a lot about its biological basis, but we do know that stress, insufficient sleep, and diet play a role. If stress-related, counseling, biofeedback, and medication can be useful. The best first steps are to keep a regular schedule, get 8 hours of sleep, don't skip meals, and don't miss school!

Is it possible to take too much over-the-counter pain reliever?

Definitely! Too much medicine causes rebound headaches - they return as soon as the medicine wears off. If you find that your child needs pain relievers 3 or more times a week, see your pediatrician.

What is rebound headache?

Rebound headache is like a tension-type headache, but is due to medication overuse. When you use over-the-counter or prescription pain-relievers or caffeine-containing medicines for headache too often (3 or more times a week for weeks on end), you make your brain super-sensitive so that even a little

headache seems more painful. (Too much caffeine can do this, too) Then you get more headaches, they hurt more, and you take even more medicine. Stopping these medications breaks the cycle. It is the key to getting better.

How to manage your headaches

- Stay informed. Read about your type of headache and its treatment
- Keep a headache diary
- Avoid headache "triggers" (things that bring on a headache)
- Watch your diet - Common headache triggers include caffeine (soft drinks, chocolate), nitrites (hot dogs, pepperoni), tyramine (aged cheeses, soy sauce), and monosodium glutamate (MSG). These triggers are found in many food products used at home and in restaurants
- Ask your pediatrician for written instructions about what to do when you have a headache.
- Limit over-the-counter medicines to no more than 2 doses per week
- Follow a regular schedule
- Don't skip meals
- Get 8 hours of sleep each night
- Learn ways to manage stress

Living with migraine

- Take your medication as directed
- When you know a migraine is coming
 - Seek rest and quiet
 - Try to relax
 - Avoid stress
 - Use a cold compress
 - Take the maximum suggested dose of prescribed medication
- See your pediatrician regularly
- Call your pediatrician when you have problems
- Follow the "how to manage your headache" tips above