

# PROBLEMATIC HEADACHES

## INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

### WHAT IS THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM?

Headache disorders are second in the world in terms of impact on wellbeing in the 10-24 year age group. Studies undertaken at West Exe school in Exeter show that the headache burden is large - up to 30% of students have problematic headache two or more times a week with impact on quality of life and school performance. Headache is a particular problem with associated mental health. The needs of young people with headache are largely unmet and poorly addressed.

### WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF HEADACHE?

Fortunately, serious causes of headache are very rare. Headache is predominately migraine (experienced by 11% of young people) or tension type headache (experienced by 17% of young people). See figure 1. With tension headache the pain is usually dull and can be anywhere in the head. The length can vary between hours and days. Migraine usually runs in families. The pain can be on one or both sides and usually last between one and 72 hours. It is more severe and associated with other problems such as feeling or being sick, not liking light or sound or movement or touch. Sometimes migraines are associated with what is called an aura. The most common one is a disturbance of vision. These can last up to an hour and usually come before the headache. They are harmless but can be quite frightening. Migraine can be associated with tummy pain which can occur when there is not a headache, particularly in younger children. Hormone changes in girls can be an important factor.

### TENSION HEADACHE

- Dull, usually both sides
- Length variable
- No additional features

### MIGRAINE

- One or both sides
- Pain more severe, lasting 1-72 hours
- 10% get an "aura", usually visual but any neurological symptoms possible
- Additional features eg. vomiting and sensitivity to light, sound, movement or touch
- Usually a genetic disposition and family history of migraine

### THINGS THAT CAN CAUSE HEADACHES IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

NOT EATING OR DRINKING REGULARLY

FAMILY AND RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS

BULLYING

LACK OF EXERCISE

TOO MUCH SCREEN TIME

SCHOOL PRESSURES

ANXIETY OR LOW MOOD

POOR DIET



### WHAT CAN YOUR CHILD DO IF THEY HAVE HEADACHES?

- Try and keep things constant. Of particular importance is regular hydration and to drink water regularly during the day. Meals shouldn't be skipped, particularly breakfast.
- Regular sleep patterns are important - go to bed and get up at the same time every day.
- Try to avoid too much screen time and certainly not within an hour of bedtime as this can disturb sleep.
- Eat healthily: Avoid fizzy drinks and drinks with artificial colouring. These can stimulate the brain and make headache more likely.
- A diary may be helpful to make a note of any headache triggers, particularly for migraine.
- Encourage plenty of exercise.
- Stress is an important factor in making headaches worse. Explore anything that your child may be worrying about.
- Simple painkillers can be important eg. paracetamol or ibuprofen. They work in different ways and can be taken together. Follow the dosage instructions on the label. However, don't use painkillers on more than 15 days of the month as this can make your child's headache worse. Painkillers can be kept at school with parental permission.
- If things are not moving forward or you feel something is not right, see your GP for advice. Don't be afraid to ask for a specialist opinion if things are not under control.
- Consider asking school for a health care plan when headache is problematic.

PRODUCED BY:

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