

Headaches and Migraines — Types and Causes

A headache is not a disease, but it may indicate that something is wrong. Headaches are common among teenagers and generally are not serious. In fact, 50 percent to 75 percent of all teens report having at least one headache per month.

However, more frequent headaches can be upsetting and worrisome for you and your family. The most common headaches for teenagers are tension headaches and migraines. Sometimes these problems may be associated with health concerns that require a visit to your pediatrician.

What causes headaches?

Headaches are most commonly caused by:

Illness

Headaches often are a symptom of other illnesses. Viral infections, strep throat, allergies, sinus infections and urinary tract infections can be accompanied by headaches. Fever also may be associated with headaches.

Skipping Meals

Even if you're trying to lose weight, you still need to eat regularly. Fad diets can make you hungry and also can give you a headache. Not getting enough fluids — which leads to dehydration — also may cause a headache.

Drugs

Alcohol, cocaine, amphetamines, diet pills and other drugs may give you a headache.

Often headaches are triggered by sleep problems, minor head injuries or certain foods (dairy products; chocolate; food additives like nitrates, nitrites and monosodium glutamate).

Sometimes, headaches also can be caused by prescribed medication, such as birth control pills, tetracycline for acne and high doses of vitamin A. Less commonly, headaches can be caused by a dental infection or abscess, and jaw alignment problems (TMJ syndrome). Although headaches are only rarely caused by eye problems, pain around the eyes — which can feel like a headache — can be caused by eye muscle imbalance or not wearing glasses that have been prescribed for you.

Only in very rare cases are headaches a symptom of a brain tumor, high blood pressure or other serious problem.

Types of Headaches

Tension Headaches

These often feel like a tight band is around your head. The pain is dull and aching and usually will be felt on both sides of your head, but may be in front and back as well. Pressure at school or at home, arguments with parents or friends, having too much to do, and feeling anxious or depressed can all cause a headache.

Migraines

This type of headache is often described as throbbing and usually felt on only one side of your head, but may be felt on both. A migraine may make you feel lightheaded or dizzy and/or make your stomach upset. You may see spots or be sensitive to light, sounds and smells. If you get migraines, chances are one of your parents or other family members also have had this problem.

A third, less common, type of headache is called a psychogenic headache. Psychogenic headaches are similar to tension headaches, but the cause is an emotional problem such as depression. Signs of depression include loss of energy, poor appetite or overeating, loss of interest in usual activities, change in sleeping patterns (trouble falling asleep, waking in the middle of the night or too early in the morning) and difficulty thinking or concentrating.