

Migraine Headaches

What is a migraine headache?

A migraine headache is a throbbing pain in the head that can cause stomach upset and make your child look very ill. It can be quite painful for your child. Most often, your child will feel normal between headaches. Migraines often have these features:

- The pain is normally on one side of the head, but may be on both sides. It may even be over the whole head.
- Children often complain of pain on their forehead or in the temple areas.
- The pain is described as a booming, throbbing, or a heartbeat type of pain.
- Your child may have an upset stomach or may vomit.
- Activity may make the pain worse.
- Your child may be sensitive to light and sound.
- They can happen from 1 to 2 times a year up to several times a week.



An aura is a warning before the headache pain starts. An aura happens 5 to 60 minutes before the pain starts. This is described as seeing things such as flashes of light, sparkles or stars. It can also involve feelings in the body such as warmth or dizziness. Most children do not have an aura before their headache pain.

What causes migraines?

The exact cause is not known. It may run in families.

The pain comes from stimulation of nerve endings in the walls of the blood vessels in the head. The nerve endings may be stimulated by:

- Chemical changes.
- Irritation of the wall of the blood vessel.
- Stretching of the blood vessel wall.

Causes (continued)

Things that may cause migraines are called triggers. They may include:

- Stress, either positive or negative.
- Changes in eating habits, such as skipping meals.
- Eating certain foods.
- Changes in sleep patterns. This could be too much or too little sleep.
- Irregular exercise or lack of exercise.
- Injury, especially to the head.
- Illness.
- Environmental factors such as weather changes, loud noises, strong odors, or bright lights.
- Hormone changes during the menstrual cycle for females.

Your health care provider will help you try to find the triggers and look at any patterns for your child's headaches. This can help you deal with them or at least know why they might be happening.

What tests are done to diagnose headaches?

Your child's health care provider will ask you many questions about your child's health and do a physical exam. Most headaches are diagnosed based on your child's history. Specific problems are normally not found during the physical exam.

Your child's health care provider may suggest some tests if they think there may be another reason for the headaches. Tests could include an EEG to look at brainwave patterns, CT scan or MRI to look more closely at your child's brain. Blood tests may also be taken. These tests, the reason for getting them, and the results will be explained to you.

ALERT: Call your child's doctor, nurse, or clinic if you have any questions or concerns or if your child has special health care needs that were not covered by this information.

This teaching sheet is meant to help you care for your child. It does not take the place of medical care. Talk with your healthcare provider for diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up.