

## Paediatric department

# Headaches in children

## How common are they?

Headaches are common in children and teenagers but may be less obvious in younger children. They are often different from the sort of headaches that adults get, so parents and healthcare professionals may not initially notice the problem.

Headaches often start suddenly in children – the child may look pale or unsettled, and the headache may make them feel nauseous (sick) or vomit. However, children can recover very quickly since headaches, including [migraines](#), tend to be more short lived in children.

Children's headaches can also affect their stomach, so a tummy ache is a common complaint.

## What causes headaches?

Some lifestyle issues can cause headaches or make existing headaches worse. These include:

- Not getting enough sleep. Visit <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/how-much-sleep-do-kids-need/> to find out how much sleep your child needs
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Having much less to eat than usual
- Looking at screens for a long time (including TVs, tablets, phones)

Children often do not complain about their eyesight, but headaches could be a sign of being unable to see properly. It is important

that they have an eye check – these are free for children under 16 years of age.

Migraines are a particular type of headache that tend to run in families. Unlike adult migraines, child migraines can be often be on both sides of the head.

Sometimes headaches can be the result of emotional problems. Times of stress or anxiety resulting from problems at school or changes in family circumstance for example can cause headaches, or make a headache feel worse.

Using too much medication (e.g. paracetamol or ibuprofen) can sometimes make headaches worse. This is called a 'Medication Overuse Headache' Please talk to your GP if your child is using medication more than 3 times a week to control a headache.

## What is a headache diary?

A headache diary can be helpful in identifying trigger factors, the impact of medication, and it can help doctors make a diagnosis.

Keep a record of when the headaches happen and record any event that's different from the normal routine. This could be a missed meal, sports activity or a late night, or an emotionally upsetting incident. If your child is old enough, they can keep their own diary.

[Download a headache diary from The Migraine Trust.](#) Headache diary apps are also available.

Please take your headache diary to any GP or hospital appointments for your child as it can be very useful information for your Doctor.

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## When should we see a GP?

### Please seek an urgent GP appointment if:

- Your child has persistent/recurrent headaches - particularly if the headache wakes them up in the middle of the night or if they have them early in the morning
- Your child develops new balance or coordination problems
- Your child has daily nausea or vomiting, especially if this is early in the morning
- Your child's headache is worse when bending forwards
- There is a new change to your child's ability to see/vision, such as blurred or double vision
- Your child has a sudden change in behaviour
- Your child is holding their head or neck in an unusual position.



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## Go to your nearest Emergency (A&E) Department if:

Your child has a new headache which is the worst they have ever had, especially if it is across the back of the head.

Your child has a fever and new headache, especially if they also have a stiff neck, are complaining about the light or have a rash that does not go away when you roll a glass over it 'the glass test'. These are all signs of possible meningitis

For details of how to do 'the glass test' visit <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/meningitis/symptoms/>

### Call 999 if:

- Your child is having or has had a fit/seizure, especially if this is the first time, or if it continues for longer than 5 minutes.

## For more information

You can call NHS 111 or visit <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/headaches-in-children/>

### Patient Advice and Liaison Services (PALS)

PALS can provide information, advice and support to patients and relatives and will listen to and act on your concerns, suggestions or queries.

**020 8934 3993**

[khft.pals@nhs.net](mailto:khft.pals@nhs.net)

### Accessible information

We are actively working to make our patient information easier to read and accessible in a range of formats. If you would like this information in large print, audio or electronic format please speak to a member of staff in the department. If you need a different format, please let us know and we will do our best to meet your request

### Pastoral & Spiritual Support Services

We offer a multi-cultural approach serving people of all faiths and life philosophies. A Duty Chaplain is available 24/7. You can request to speak to a Church of England or Roman Catholic Priest, the Rabbi or Imam.

**Please call the hospital switchboard on 020 8546 7711 and ask to speak to the Duty Chaplain.**

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[www.kingstonhospital.nhs.uk](http://www.kingstonhospital.nhs.uk)