

Patient information from BMJ

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Migraine in children

If you're the parent of a child or teenager who gets migraines, you know how upsetting these headaches can be. But, there are treatments that can help. Also, doing simple things, like managing stress, may reduce how many migraines your child gets.

You can use our information to talk to your doctor about the right treatments for your child.

What are migraines in children and teenagers?

Migraines are very bad headaches. Your child might also get other symptoms, such as feeling sick to their stomach and seeing flashing lights (see below). Although migraines are unpleasant, they are not dangerous. They don't mean your child has a more serious problem.

We don't know why some children get migraines. But certain things seem to bring on a migraine in some people. These include:

- feeling stressed (maybe because of an exam, or problems with friends)
- eating certain foods, including cheese, chocolate, and citrus fruit
- not drinking enough fluids, and
- missing meals.

Girls may also be more likely to get migraines during their period.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom is a bad headache. But migraines can be different from ordinary headaches in several ways. For example:

- a migraine headache can last hours to days. It might go away only when your child sleeps.
- migraines tend to be on just one side of the head.
- a migraine may cause a pounding feeling, like someone banging a drum.
- Your child may feel worse if they try to do anything.

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- your child may feel nauseous and possibly vomit.
- they may have double vision or blurred vision.
- light or sound may hurt their head. They may need to lie down in a dark room.

Some people have warning signs before they get a migraine. These are called auras. Some examples are getting pins and needles, yawning a lot, or seeing zigzags or flashing lights.

Things you can do

It's helpful to learn what triggers your child's migraines. You or your child can keep a diary to write down what your child does and eats each day, and when they get migraines. This might help you figure out whether certain foods, certain activities, or stress trigger a migraine for your child.

Sometimes, one of the best ways to prevent migraine attacks is to learn to manage stress. There are lots of ways to cope with stress.

Your child can learn relaxation techniques, or do yoga or exercise regularly. You can get books with advice about how to deal with stress. Or your child can see a therapist.

What treatments are available?

There are various treatments for migraines. But it's not clear how well some of them work in children compared with adults.

If your child takes medications for their migraines, make sure you follow the instructions carefully to avoid possible problems. If your child takes pain medication too often, for example, they can actually get more headaches.

Medications to treat migraine pain

Medications for migraine pain work best if your child takes them as soon as they start getting symptoms.

You can buy simple pain medications, such as **acetaminophen** and **ibuprofen**, from a pharmacy. Younger children can take these medications as syrup.

Be careful not to give your child more acetaminophen than is recommended. It can cause serious liver damage if your child takes too much. NOTE: No one under age 18 should take **aspirin**. It can cause a rare but dangerous problem called Reye's syndrome.

If ordinary pain medications haven't helped, doctors sometimes prescribe **codeine**, which is a stronger pain reliever. However, it can cause more serious side effects, such as dizziness and shortness of breath. It is usually recommended only for children over age 12.

Doctors also sometimes prescribe a medication called a **triptan**. Triptans work well to control migraine pain for many people. Children often take triptans as a nasal spray, but they also come as pills. Triptans can have side effects. For example, your child may find that food tastes different.

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Medications to stop your child from feeling sick to their stomach

Your child may also need medication to stop them from feeling sick to their stomach. These are called antiemetics.

As with pain medications, antiemetics work best if your child takes it as soon as they start getting symptoms. It may make your child feel sleepy.

Medications to prevent migraines

If your child gets a lot of severe migraines, your doctor may recommend treatments to prevent these attacks. Unfortunately, there isn't much research on how well these medications work in children. And they will usually have to be prescribed by a specialist doctor. To read more, see our leaflet *Migraine in children: medications to prevent attacks*.

What to expect in the future

Children who get migraines sometimes stop getting them when they get older. This is more likely if your child started getting migraines before they reached puberty. Even if your child's migraines don't go away, most people find that they become less severe and less frequent when they get older.

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