

Headaches Are Normal Part of Adolescence

By J.W. Bartlett, M.D., F.A.A.P.

Q: My 14-year-old child seems to have a lot of headaches. Is this anything I should be worried about?

A: Parents should know that headaches are a normal part of adolescence and are a common complaint that we see with teenagers and young adults. There are three major types of headaches.

The first and most common type is a tension headache. Tension headaches are described as feeling like there is a tight band around the head. The pain is usually dull, aching and frequently on both sides of the head but may be in the front and back as well. The causes of tension headaches are multiple and can be associated with not having a set time to go to sleep and wake up in the morning, not getting enough sleep, overexertion or overexposure to sunlight, stress at home or at school.

Tension headaches also can be caused by lack of proper nutrition, such as strictly sugary meals or skipping meals. Not getting enough fluids, particularly water, can cause some mild dehydration which can contribute to headaches. Caffeinated soft drinks or alcohol also can lead to tension headaches. Headaches can certainly be triggered by loud music or loud noises (monster truck rallies or automobile races). One of the newer causes of headaches is excessive “screen” watching, such as watching a lot of video games, time spent on the internet or watching television.

Treatments for tension headaches include avoiding the above triggers and also encouraging teenagers to change some of their sleep and dietary habits. Most of these common tension headaches will go away in a short time with rest and over the counter medications including naproxen, ibuprofen or acetaminophen.

The second type of headache is the migraine, which is described frequently as throbbing and can be either on the front or one side of the head, although they may sometimes move from side to side. A migraine headache frequently causes one to feel somewhat dizzy or lightheaded and there may be some nausea or even vomiting associated with the headache. Some teenagers may describe unusual smells, may see

spots, and be overly sensitive to sounds and bright lights. Migraine headaches tend to run in families.

The third type is frequently described as a tension headache, but is triggered by anxiety and depression, rather than the triggers mentioned earlier. Families should watch for signs of depression, marked changes in sleeping habits, declining school performance and difficulty concentrating.

If you notice any of the following symptoms, your child should be seen by a pediatrician as soon as possible: A headache that follows any significant head injury (even if there is no loss of consciousness), any headache that follows a seizure, headaches associated with recurring episodes of vomiting (particularly if it occurs while the young person is at rest in a horizontal position), or any symptoms of impaired balance, dizziness or vision difficulties.

Most headaches do not indicate serious problems; however if any of these problems occur, please don't hesitate to contact your child's physician. If headaches seem to increase in frequency and severity, the adolescent should be evaluated as soon as it can be arranged.

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