

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. Fortunately, there are treatments that can help. Also, doing simple things, like managing stress, may reduce how many migraines your child gets.

We've looked at the best and most up-to-date research to produce this information. You can use it to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are right 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 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, or 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 sick 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 work 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 regular exercise. You can get books with advice about how to deal with stress. Or your child can see a therapist.

What treatments work?

The good news is that there are lots of treatments. However, there hasn't been much research on how well they work for children.

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

Medicines to treat migraine pain

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

You can buy ordinary pain medicines, such as **paracetamol** and **ibuprofen**, from a pharmacy. Younger children can take these medicines as syrup.

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

If ordinary pain medicines 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 medicine called a **triptan**. Sumatriptan is a common type. Triptans work well to control migraine pain for many people. But there has not been much research into how well they work for children. Children often take triptans as a nasal spray, but they also come as tablets. Triptans can have side effects. For example, your child may find that food tastes different.

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Medicines to stop your child feeling sick

Your child may also need medicine to stop them feeling sick. One medicine frequently used in children 6 years and older is **cyclizine**. It is a type of medicine called an antihistamine.

As with pain medicines, cyclizine works best if your child takes it as soon as they start getting symptoms. It may make your child feel sleepy.

Medicines to prevent migraines

If your child gets a lot of bad migraines, your doctor may recommend treatments to prevent these attacks. Options include medicines such as propranolol (a medication usually used for the heart) or topiramate (a medication usually used for seizures). These are usually prescribed by a specialist doctor. To read more, see our leaflet *Migraine in children: medicines to prevent attacks*.

What will happen to my child?

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, they may not be as bad or frequent when they get older.

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