Spotting, Treating and Preventing Migraines in Children

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Migraines in Children

It may seem like migraines are an affliction of adulthood, but children can be just as vulnerable to the throbbing pain and side effects of migraine headaches. In fact, half of migraine sufferers experience their first attack before the age of 12, and about 10% of school-age children will suffer from migraines at one point.

Migraine headaches are never pleasant, but left untreated, they can have far-reaching effects for children. Disabling pain can lead to anxiety and isolation, and chronic migraines can certainly affect quality of life and social development. In many cases, pain relievers and a bit of tender loving care are all you can give your child during a migraine, but there are other times when you should seek prompt medical attention.

Recognizing Migraines in Children

Children experience many of the same migraine symptoms as adults, but there are some distinct differences in how symptoms tend to manifest. Add to that a communication barrier, inconstant discomfort and uneven expression, and it can be extremely difficult to pinpoint what sort of pain your child is experiencing. However, there are a few telltale signs that a migraine is likely to blame:

- Late afternoon start (migraines in adults typically start in the mornings)
- Pain lasting less than four hours (pain goes on much longer for many adult migraine sufferers)
- Nausea and vomiting
- Sensitivity to light and sound
- Pulsing or throbbing pain

Children may also experience symptoms others than head pain, like dizziness, abdominal pain, and mood swings. These are known as migraine equivalents, and may or may not come along with migraine aura (visual disturbances like colored spots or blurry lines).

Although boys tend to suffer less and less from migraines as they move through adolescence, migraine frequency and intensity often increases for girls entering puberty. Experts surmise that hormones have a lot to do with pain fluctuation, which may explain why adolescent girls are three times as likely to experience migraines as boys of the same age.

Treating Your Child’s Migraines

The best treatment option will depend on the frequency, severity, and duration of your child’s migraine. Begin with less invasive treatments, and move up to more powerful interventions as needed – the less medication, the better, especially in the long-term.

- **Topical treatments**. Sensitivity to light and heat can be especially uncomfortable during a migraine, so try

moving to a cool, dark room and placing a cool towel on your child's head.
- **Sleep**. Rest and relaxation can go far to relieving headache pain, and for some children, a long bout of sleep can eradicate the migraine.
- **Regulating diet**. Children seems to be more sensitive to dietary changes or skipping meals than adults who suffer from migraines. Spreading out healthy meals (minus any trigger foods) over the course of the day, and making sure to never miss one, will help to ease migraine pain and prevent future attacks.

Next page: more ways to treat your child's migraines and predicting future migraines.

Treating Your Child's Migraines

- **Medication**. Drugs targeted to migraine pain and discomfort can be taken as a preventative measure or to treat a migraine headache. Non-prescription pain relievers like ibuprofen (Advil) and acetaminophen (Tylenol) are usually the first line of attack, and can be very effective when taken at the first sign of migraine pain. If these don't do the trick, your doctor may suggest trying migraine-specific drugs called Triptans, and perhaps an anti-emetic to take care of digestive distress that often accompanies children's migraines.

It's important to consult a doctor if you suspect that migraines are at play. They can help formulate a good home care regimen to take care of future attacks as quickly and painlessly as possible. Pay your pediatrician a visit right away if your child's headaches are waking them from sleep, or come with neck pain and stiffness. Also if the headache was brought on by a traumatic event – such as a fall or blow to the head – it could signal a concussion, especially if your child seems disoriented, nauseous, or just not acting like herself.

Predicting and Preventing Future Migraine Headaches

Headaches can come from a wide variety of sources, and while migraines are mysterious and difficult to predict, some things are known to provoke them in susceptible children. Understanding your child's risk factors means you can react swiftly if a migraine hits, and will keep you on the lookout for other health complications that don't fit the migraine pattern:

Genetic Predisposition

Although researchers have yet to find a specific gene that's responsible for migraine headaches, they are certain of a genetic link. Studies suggest that 80% of migraine sufferers have a family history of migraine headaches, and if one parent sufferers from them, their child has a 50% chance of developing migraines, too. Migraine triggers can also be inherited: bright lights, certain foods, fatigue, and changes in weather may bother both parent and child.

Food Additives and Preservatives

Nitrates, sulfites, and other food additives are found in lots of products that kids love, and some experts believe they may also be migraine triggers. The issue could be an interaction with blood flow: nitrates dilate blood vessels, which then bring too much blood to the brain, resulting in a headache. Bacon, sandwich meat and hot dogs are some of the worst offenders, though food additives hide in all sorts of products, so get in the habit of reading food labels closely.

Problems in the Brain

Many, if not most, headaches in children are symptoms of an illness or infection, but not always. Less often, migraines are triggered by an underlying disease. An abscess or bleeding in the brain can bring on severe pain and pressure, as can an infection like meningitis (inflammation of the membrane around the brain and spinal cord) or encephalitis (inflammation of the brain). Very rarely, a brain tumour presses painfully on a certain area. In these cases, headaches are usually chronic, worsening, and accompanied by visual problems and dizziness, muscle

weakness, and/or nausea.

If you suspect your child is suffering from a migraine, don’t panic. The chances of a tumor or dangerous abnormality in the brain are extremely low, and there are safe ways to calm the pain and discomfort until you can get to your doctor. But the more information you can offer your medical professional, the quicker they can make an accurate diagnosis and get treatment started, so try to record every detail about the pain, and be sure to relay any symptoms or concerns that could help. Work with your doctor and encourage your child to communicate their symptoms regularly, so you can stay one step ahead of migraine pain.