

Headaches in Children

Dr Jo Jones, Paediatrician, in Blazer, January 2013

Parents worry about headaches in their children. They worry most about brain tumours (very rare at 1:20,000 headache presentations) partly because they fear cancer and partly because they think that headaches are rare in children when they are actually quite common (25% of school age children have recurrent headaches).

When do parents need to seek medical help?

There are a few 'rules' that I apply to most 'painful' conditions. Does the pain affect sleep (either preventing a child falling asleep or waking a child from sleep), diminish the child's play or other normal activities, or cause loss of appetite or weight? If the answer is yes to any or all of these things, then a careful chat with your GP is important.

Headaches are similar. *Migraines* are common in children (10% of children between the age of 5 and 15 have migraine) and can affect appetite, sleep and activity. They are however pretty specific in their nature and an experienced doctor should be able to diagnose and treat, usually without the need for a scan.

Cluster headaches are severe, 'explosive' headaches that occur repeatedly for weeks to months at a time, followed by headache-free periods, rare in children under the age of 10. Headaches are typically short in duration, sometimes lasting seconds and often associated with eye symptoms such as redness, eye-watering or a drooping eyelid.

Any headache, however, that wakes a child from sleep, causes a loss of balance or co-ordination, numbness or weakness in arms or legs, causes early morning vomiting, deterioration in school work or personality, or changes in vision such as a squint, double vision or loss of vision, must be taken very seriously. Usually, an MRI scan is indicated. New symptoms on top of a pre-existing chronic headache also need re-evaluation. It's likely that a specialist opinion is sought from a Paediatrician.