

When a Child's Headache is More Than Just a Headache

While headaches are the fifth most common health problem among children, they are usually not serious. Tension headaches are benign and tend to be stress-related. Some headaches are serious and could be caused by a brain tumor. Migraine headaches are often the most common recurrent headache children suffer.

When children have recurring headaches, they can experience attention and behavioral problems and depression. When headaches start interfering with a child's life or if a child experiences more serious headache symptoms (listed to the right), then it's time for a medical evaluation.



Kevin Joseph, DO



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“For children, headaches can also be a symptom of sleep deprivation or neurological disease, such as seizures,” says Pediatric Neurologist and Sleep Medicine specialist, Kevin Joseph, DO. He and Don Q. Thai, MD, practice pediatric neurology at the Neuroscience Institute. They see children who may have undiagnosed nighttime seizures interfering with the quality of sleep, which result in recurring headaches. Both Obstructive Sleep Apnea and Restless Leg Syndrome (RLS) interfere with restful sleep and can cause headaches. Obstructive Sleep Apnea partially impairs breathing throughout the night, and RLS causes leg pain or discomfort that is only relieved by movement or walking. In addition to headaches, sleep deprivation can cause hyperactivity, inattention, and trigger a host of different kinds of seizures, including staring spells.

If a child's physician believes headaches may be sleep-related, a sleep study may be recommended. The Sleep Center at VMC has a dedicated pediatric sleep facility where children spend the night, with a parent, for monitoring. In many cases, The Sleep Center can provide an appointment within a few weeks. Valley Medical Center also has inpatient video EEG monitoring available for children who may be having seizures.

“Parents are important members of the child's healthcare team,” says Dr. Joseph. “In addition to staying in close contact with a child's primary physician and drawing on the resources of the Neuroscience Institute and Valley Medical Center, Dr. Thai and I count on parents to report what's happening at home and school and to help support and reinforce the treatments we recommend to manage a child's headaches.”

Kevin R. Joseph, DO, is Board Certified in Neurology with Special Qualifications in Pediatric Neurology and a subspecialty Board Certification in Sleep Medicine. Don Q. Thai, MD, is Board Certified in Neurology with Special Qualifications in Pediatric Neurology. For more information, call 425.917.6218 or see valleymed.org/neuro.

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Serious Headache Symptoms

- Very young child with headache
- Child awakened by headache pain or early AM headaches
- Pain worsened by strain, such as a cough or a sneeze
- Vomiting with a headache
- Sudden onset of the “worst headache” ever
- Headache becoming more severe or continuous
- Personality changes
- Vision changes
- Arm or leg weakness
- Seizures

Tips for Managing Your Child's Headaches

- Rest in a quiet, dark environment
- Manage stress at home and school
- Avoid known triggers, such as caffeine, lack of sleep and skipping meals
- Encourage good nutrition
- Encourage regular exercise
- Medications, as recommended by your child's physician