

Tension headache information pack

Information for children and young people aged 7-12

.....'s headaches

There are two common types of headache in children: **migraine** and **tension** headaches.

You have **TENSION** headaches. This is the **most common** type of headache in children and adults.

Around 1 in 2 young people are thought to get tension headaches (Baglioni et al., 2023)



What can happen when I get a tension headache?

Here are two children and their tension headaches.

Sam, aged 7



“I have a pain in my head all of the time. I can usually carry on and go to school but sometimes it makes it difficult to concentrate or sleep.”

Ellie, aged 11

“My head feels horrible for about three hours a day most days. When this happens I can’t eat and I like to sit in a dark quiet room listening to music”



Although Sam and Ellie’s headaches sound very different, they are both **tension headaches**.

Here are some of the signs of **tension headaches** in children:

- a throbbing, squeezing or pressure feeling all over the head (like when you put an elastic band around your head)
- can last between 30 minutes and 7 days, or can feel like it’s always there
- gets worse as the day goes on
- makes it hard to sleep and/or eat.

Tension headaches might stop you from doing things you want to do.

What's your tension headache like? Can you draw yours and write down what it feels like?

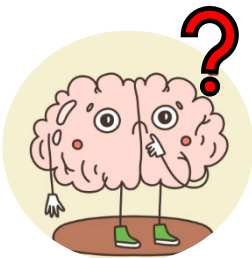


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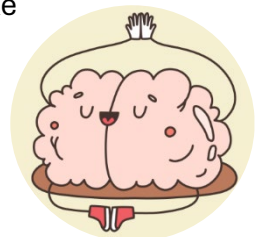
Why do I get tension headaches?



Scientists do not know why some people get headaches more than others, but there are lots of ways in which we can manage them effectively. Whilst it is not possible to control some things (like the weather, genetics, having to go to school) it is clear that how you **feel** and what you **do** can affect your headaches.

This is because all of these things affect your brain and your blood vessels, and make them **unbalanced**.

*In order to try and help reduce headaches, we want to keep the brain as balanced as possible. A happy and calm brain = **easier to manage headaches!***



What can I do to manage headaches?

One way of understanding headaches: **the biopsychosocial model**



The biopsychosocial model looks at how our bodies, minds, and the world around us affect our headaches;

biological factors (what the body does – think about eating, any medication we take, how much sleep we get, if we are unwell),

social factors (the world around us – think about other people like friends, family, teachers, and maybe even our doctors too),








psychological factors (how we feel – think about your mood, if you are stressed out, thoughts you have about yourself and others).

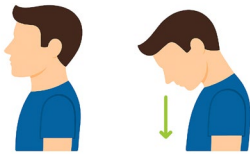
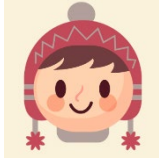

The model proposes that good headache management needs **all** parts of the model to be working well.

Why is this important?

1. Tension headaches can be triggered by psychological difficulties.
2. Severe headache can itself be a cause of stress which can, in turn, make the problem worse. It's like a big cycle!
3. Even if stress or anxiety is not the main reason for a headache, strategies to manage pain can help people cope with their pain better, meaning the headache has less of an impact.

Preventing headaches: noticing triggers

Common headache triggers	What might help?
<p>Intense emotions such as worry, stress or anger</p>	<p>Communicate your worries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to someone - this can be a teacher, a parent, a relative, a friend, or even your pet! • Paint, draw or design a worry box about your worries.  <p>Relax</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breathing exercises. • Tightening your muscles and then letting them feel loose again can help release tension. • Listen to relaxing music. 
<p>Skipping meals or eating patterns that change a lot</p>	<p>Eat enough and regularly</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work out what time breakfast, lunch and tea works for you and your family and stick to it - no skipping meals or missing breakfast! • Eat healthy snacks if you feel like you need to in between. 
<p>Dehydration and not drinking enough</p>	<p>Drink 8 glasses of water a day</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Or squash (sometimes) but avoid drinks like coca-cola or irn bru because they have caffeine in them which can make your headache worse. 
<p>Eating some types of foods</p>	<p>Avoid foods that give you a headache</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Such as cheese, chocolate and hamburgers. 
<p>Doing too much or too little activity, including competitive sports</p>	<p>Exercise regularly</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing too much all at once can give you a headache, but if you exercise regularly then your brain gets used to it. Don't over-do it though! This is called pacing. • Try to exercise for 30 - 60 minutes every day - walking, running and cycling are all good ideas. Exercise also helps to reduce feelings of worry. (See the useful app sheet attached) 
<p>Not getting enough sleep or having an irregular sleep routine</p>	<p>Rest and sleep</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wind down in the evening without screens, bright lights and noises. • Books, podcasts and music are all great activities to do before bed • It is important to get up and go to bed at roughly the same time every day (a wee lie-in at the weekends is okay though) 

<p>Tension in the muscles of the neck and head</p>	<p>Stretch</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tension can be due to squinting and not sitting properly. • Stretching the muscles in your neck and head can help with these types of headaches and you might find it relaxing too. • Why not try some yoga? 
<p>Weather changes, particularly cold weather</p>	<p>Wrap up warmly and try to wear a hat if needed.</p> 
<p>Bright lights and loud noises</p>	<p>Use sunglasses, headphones and ear defenders as necessary.</p> 
<p>Too much screen time</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too much screen time can affect our sleep, mood and eyesight. The bright light disrupts the hormones that help us sleep, and may make you irritable or unable to focus with too much use • Try slow crafts before bed, like drawing or doing a jigsaw • Try some outdoor play – maybe go on a treasure hunt or tell stories from shapes in the clouds! This takes time away from a screen • Keep your phone out of your bedroom and set times away from it for social time (in real life!)

Preventing headaches: routines and pacing



IMPORTANT - Keep your sleep, eating and exercising in a ROUTINE

Your brain and body learn to expect things to happen in a certain order when you have a routine. Breaking routines regularly can affect your blood and brain and give you a headache. This is why it's important to get up and go to bed at round about the same time every day.

PACE yourself and PLAN - don't do too much or too little

All of the ideas we have given you are good but you will have a busy schedule of school, family, friends and activities as well, so it's important to know what you're going to beforehand and plan with whoever you live with when you're going to **rest as well**. **RESTING is a key part of helping to prevent all headaches.**

IMPORTANT: Doing all of these things might not make the headaches go away completely but hopefully they will reduce how often they happen, how much they hurt and how much they affect your life.

Headache diary to record your triggers – here is an example below:

When did it start?	How long did it last?	Where did it happen?	What was happening before hand?	What did it feel like?	How much did it hurt? (0 = no pain - 10 = lots of pain)	What did you do?	Did anything help?
<i>8am Monday morning</i>	<i>45 minutes</i>	<i>On the way to school in the car</i>	<i>I did not sleep well and I was worried about school</i>	<i>A throbbing pain all over my head and my tummy felt sick</i>	<i>7 - hurt quite a lot but not the worst pain ever</i>	<i>Told my mum, drank some water and sat still</i>	<i>Drinking water and sitting still with my eyes closed</i>

Why don't you have a go at designing your own? Make sure you include all of the questions above! Ask an adult to help you if you get stuck.

Look at your headache diary. Pick your top three strategies that have helped. Write them here:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

.....'s **headache PLAN: what to do when I get a headache**

So far we've talked about how to prevent tension headaches, and now we're going to talk about what to do when you get a tension headache:

Tell someone. Headaches often get worse when you're worried about something, so talking to your teacher/parent might be really useful.



Eat/drink something

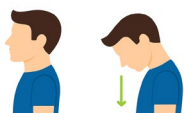
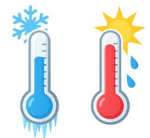
Take some medication (only if it has been agreed with your doctor).



Sit or lie in a dark and quiet room (maybe have a nap if you need to).

Distract yourself - try some gentle music, a familiar book or talking to someone.

Change temperature - trying popping something warm or cool on the part of your body that hurts, like an ice-pack or heated cushion, or have a bath/shower.



If there is a specific part of your head or neck that hurts, gentle stretching, loosening of muscles and applying heat can help.

Try some relaxation - deep breathing and/or listening to music and think about a time you were happy and relaxed. See the list of useful apps for more ideas.



Try some gentle exercise such as a walk.

Think coping thoughts! Remember all of the times before that you have managed to cope with the pain and felt better afterwards.

PLAN time to rest, time to do what you need to do, and time for enjoyable activities.

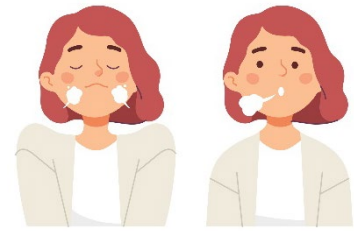
Here is a breathing exercise and a grounding exercise that may be helpful for calming your headaches down:

Square breathing

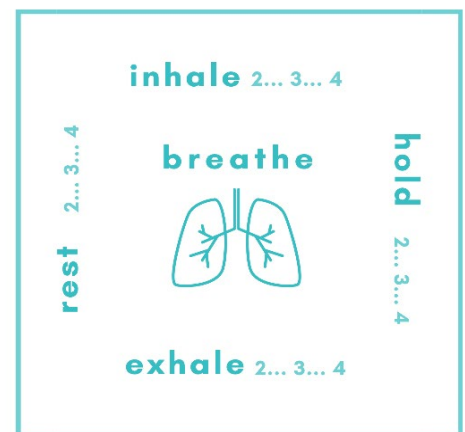
When we are feeling anxious, we might notice our breathing getting faster and shallower. Taking some slow and deep breaths can help us feel more relaxed.

This is an example of a slow breathing exercise:

- Draw a square on a piece of paper.
- Slowly breathe in for 4 seconds and move your finger along one side of the square.
- Then try holding your breath for 4 seconds, while moving your finger along the next side of the square.
- Now breathe out for 4 seconds and move your finger along the next side of the square.
- Then have a rest for 4 seconds. Repeat this until you feel calmer.



SQUARE BREATHING



Grounding

Use the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 method to help your brain focus on what is going on around you rather than focusing on your pain.

Start by sitting in a comfortable place and take a deep breath.

Then think of:



5 things you can see



4 things you can feel



3 things you can hear



2 things you can smell



1 thing you can taste

Remember, you don't have to try all of these at once - it's important to find out what works for you! Keep a record of what works so that you're best prepared for next time, and can act quickly when you feeling a headache starting.

If you are at school you can return to the classroom once the headache has gone, or return to gentle work if you are very tired afterwards.

This plan has been agreed with






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Please share with school.



When might I need more help?

It is important to tell an adult if your headache **changes** - if they start happening **more often** or become **more painful**, or if you start to experience **different things**. It might be that your parent/carer has to phone your doctor (paediatrician).

Suggested Resources

App	Helpful for...
Smiling Mind 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: suitable for all ages • Provides different guided relaxation and mindfulness exercises • Free
Chill Panda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: children • Work through quests and tasks based on how you are feeling • Provides breathing and stretching exercises • Free
Head Space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: older children and adolescents • Provides mindfulness exercises • Has a free trial
Calm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: older children and adolescents • Provides relaxation exercises including a visual aid for controlled breathing techniques
Relax Lite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: older children and adolescents • Provides relaxation exercises including a visual aid for controlled breathing techniques

Websites and supports for children and parents

<p>A website for parents of younger children with ideas for how to help them to manage pain:</p> <p>http://mychildispain.org.uk/what-can-i-do/intro/</p>	
<p>Children's Health Scotland offer online groups called SMS: Connect to help you to improve the relationship you have with your health and build your confidence and self-esteem. By taking part you can develop skills that can help you cope better with your health condition and give you an opportunity to connect with other children and young people with health conditions. You can refer yourself to the group on the website below.</p> <p>https://www.childrenshealthscotland.org/service/smsconnect/</p>	
<p>Health Professionals for Safer Screens includes resources and information on smartphone use and harmful online content.</p> <p>https://healthprofessionalsforsaferscreens.org/</p>	