

Migraine headaches in children - Dr Maina Kava

Headache is a relatively common complaint in children. There are many different causes of headaches ranging from something relatively simple like upper respiratory infection to serious and life threatening conditions like meningitis and brain tumours.

Headaches generally resolve if the primary condition is treated. However, recurrent headaches are concerning and need further evaluation. The most frequent cause of recurrent headaches in children is migraine.

The symptoms of migraine in children can be quite varied. Typically, migraine headaches are throbbing in nature but can be described as dull or squeezing headache. In children, the headache can occur on one or both sides whereas in adults it is usually one sided. Children usually complain of pain in the forehead or above the ears. Generally migraine attacks are associated with nausea, vomiting and sensitivity to light and noise. The headaches generally are of a short duration in children but can last for up to 72 hours. Some children describe an "aura" which precedes a migraine headache, but these are generally uncommon in most children. An aura usually is visual and may consist of spots or coloured lights in front of the eyes.

Sometimes, migraines can be triggered by certain foods, not drinking enough water, sleep deprivation, missing meals, stress etc.

Most migraines don't need further investigations but require an expert evaluation. If there are atypical symptoms an MRI of the brain may be considered by your specialist. Atypical symptoms include early morning headaches, post head injury headaches, headaches with neck stiffness, change in vision, vomiting, loss of awareness, fever or difficulty in balancing.

A migraine headache is typically relieved by sleeping preferably in a quiet dark room. Medications for pain relief may be needed at times. Over the counter medications should be avoided as far as possible and the use should be restricted to the prescribed dosage only. The mainstay of management is to keep a good diary to look for potential triggers and to avoid the triggers as far as possible. Some children have severe and recurrent headaches for which they may have to take time off school. In these cases medications to prevent migraine could be prescribed.

In summary, migraines are the most frequent cause of recurrent headaches in children. Most migraines are of short duration and can be managed conservatively. Warning signs should be looked for and further investigated.