

Caregiver Information on Tension-Type Headaches

How do tension-type headaches manifest?

Children and adolescents usually describe tension-type headaches as pressing and constricting either their whole head or just the forehead and temple areas. In some cases, they are also described as one-sided. The severity of these headaches ranges from mild to moderate pain that can last minutes to days. Children and adolescents with frequent or chronic tension-type headaches may report severe pain. Severe tension-type headaches may be accompanied by dizziness and sensitivity to noise or light. Physical activity typically does not significantly worsen tension-type headaches.

Origin of tension-type headaches

To understand how tension-type headaches develop, we use the biopsychosocial model. This model states that biological, psychological, and social factors interact to lead to the development of pain.

In tension-type headaches, for example, family predisposition (your genetics) plays an important role. In addition, tension arising from stress with friends, family, or school often contributes to the development of tension-type headaches.

What can we do about tension-type headaches?

There are a few things you can do to help your child reduce tension-type headaches.

1) Reduce physical tension and stress.

What situations cause your child stress? When is your child physically tense? Try to work with your child to reduce these situations in everyday life. Physical activity can significantly help your child to relax. Relaxation exercises such as progressive muscle relaxation, breathing exercises, and yoga also reduce tension.

2) Distraction

Since pain perception takes place in the brain, pain can be decreased with the help of some attention-diverting tricks. When attention is diverted away from pain, the perception of pain decreases. Therefore, distraction is an important strategy for managing tension-type headaches. With distraction and movement, the brain's pain center is not activated as much and the pain is perceived less strongly.

For tension-type headaches, it can be helpful to help your child find distractions. For example, you can play together or motivate your child to hang out with friends or play sports. Distraction helps with tension-type headaches much better than medication does!

3) Pain medications are not always necessary!

Taking medication for tension-type headaches is not always a good idea. If used excessively, medication can actually lead to more headaches. You risk developing a headache from medication overuse.

For more information on tension-type headaches, see the pages on tension-type headaches for children and adolescents at www.headeggs.org. Here, you will also find a video with many helpful tips about tension-type headaches.

Important: Always take your child's pain seriously, but don't allow it to affect everyday life more than necessary. Your child should still go to school, engage in their favorite activities, and hang out with their friends. Remember, distraction helps reduce headaches!