Other formats:

If you would like this information in another language, large print or audio, please ask the department where you are being treated, to contact the patient information team:
patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk.

Please note: We do not currently hold many leaflets in other languages; written translation requests are funded and agreed by the department who has authored the leaflet.

We are now a smoke-free site: smoking will not be allowed anywhere on the hospital site.
For advice and support in quitting, contact your GP or the free NHS stop smoking helpline on 0800 169 0 169.

Paediatric Clinical Psychology
Patient Information
Headaches
Information for young people and their parents/carers

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This information may be helpful for you if:

- You are struggling to understand your headaches.
- Your headaches are stopping you doing the things you enjoy.
- Your headaches make you feel worried or sad.
- You want to have more control over your experience of headaches.
- Your child is experiencing headaches and you want to support them with managing it.

**What are headaches?**

Headaches are a common problem growing up, with around 4 to 10% of young people reporting symptoms. There is often no physical problem causing the pain and because of this, medicines may not be helpful in preventing or relieving your headaches. However, the pain is real and can interfere with our daily routines, such as missing school or the activities we enjoy. In order to manage your pain effectively, we need to focus on other parts of the pain – the way it makes you think, feel and behave.

It is not always clear what causes headaches, but we do know that it is the brain that controls whether or not we feel pain, by transferring pain messages to and from the part of the body which hurts. Imagine there is a ‘pain gate’ between the brain and the body. Lots of young people find that their headaches are worse if they are feeling stressed or worried. The ‘pain gate theory’ tells us that this is one of the most common things that can open the gate. But if this gate is closed, pain messages can’t get through and we won’t feel pain!

**Talking about headaches**

There are lots of different people you can talk to about your headaches, including your parents, friends or your GP. Some young people find it helpful to speak to a Clinical Psychologist, who can help young people in managing and coping with the pain they are experiencing, as well as thinking about other possible factors which we know can contribute, such as feeling worried or anxious.

**Further information**

Here are some links to websites and apps where you can find helpful relaxation techniques and coping strategies:

- **Pain Toolkit for Teenagers**: [www.paintoolkit.org](http://www.paintoolkit.org)
- **Headspace**: [https://www.headspace.com/](https://www.headspace.com/)
- **Young Minds**: [http://www.youngminds.org.uk/](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/)
- **ActiveMe**: [http://myhealthapps.net/app/details/191/activeme](http://myhealthapps.net/app/details/191/activeme)
Breathing
Imagine a point just below your tummy button. Breathe into that spot, filling your stomach with air. Let the air fill you from the stomach up, then let it out like deflating a balloon. With every long, slow breath you breathe out, you should feel more relaxed.

Slowing down your breathing will also help you relax. Do this by taking long, slow breaths. Count slowly to five as you breathe in and then count slowly to five as you breathe out. Your body will naturally relax as your breathing slows.

Guided imagery
When you have a headache, you can help yourself feel more relaxed by thinking about things you find calming or restful. Think about your dream place. It could be somewhere you have been before or an imaginary place. Try to make the picture as real as you can. What can you hear? What can you see? What can you smell?

Here are some examples:
- The warm sun shining on your face
- The wind blowing in the trees
- The sound of waves crashing on the beach
- Clouds floating across the sky

Here are some simple strategies you can try which may help to prevent or relieve the pain.

Diet
Going for long periods of time without eating can lead to low blood sugar levels, which can sometimes make us feel dizzy and trigger a headache. Try to:
- Eat balanced meals at regular times
- Avoid foods that can trigger a headache

Fluids
Dehydration is a well-known cause of headaches, so it is important to stay hydrated throughout the day. Try to:
- Drink plenty of water (aim for two litres a day)
- Avoid caffeinated drinks, such as coffee and some fizzy drinks

Sleep hygiene
Lack of sleep can affect our brains in a number of ways, such as poorer concentration and memory. Most young people need between 8-10 hours of sleep per night. Try to:
- Have regular and sufficient sleep
- Avoid caffeinated drinks in the evening
- Ensure all screens, such as phones, televisions or laptops are switched off at least 30 minutes before going to bed. We know that the light from screens can affect the levels of chemicals in our brain that help us sleep!

Screen time
Using devices such as phones, tablets and computers can make us strain our eyes, which can lead to headaches. We know it isn’t always easy to avoid this during school, work or at home, but where possible. Try to:
- Reduce the use of phones, tablets and computers
- Take regular breaks after using electronic devices for 30 minutes at a stretch
- Get up, stretch, move around or get some fresh air
Exercise
Regular and adequate exercise is important in maintaining our general health and wellbeing. Exercise can also be a good way to relax and distract yourself, which can help to relieve pain. Maintaining good posture can also release tension, which can sometimes cause headaches.

Pacing
When we are in pain, it can sometimes be difficult to go about our day as normal, for example: going to school, seeing friends or taking part in our hobbies. On a ‘bad day’ when you are experiencing headache pain, you may feel like lying down and doing nothing, whereas on a ‘good day’, you may have lots of energy and want to catch up on all the things you have missed. We call this a ‘Boom and Bust’ cycle:

- Taking regular breaks will stop you from over-doing things before a headache starts.

Relaxation skills
Research shows that psychological approaches can be very effective in managing headaches and closing the ‘pain gate’. Relaxation techniques can help us counteract the effects of stress on our bodies, leading to a reduction in headaches and the intensity of pain.

When we feel stressed or anxious, our bodies respond in a number of ways:
- Increased heart rate, breathing rate and blood pressure
- Muscles tense and can feel uncomfortable
- You may feel either alert or very tired
- Disrupted sleep patterns
- Feeling restless or distracted
- Experiences pain!

Progressive muscle relaxation
When we feel stressed or anxious, our muscles can automatically tense in preparation for a ‘fight or flight’ response, where we might need to respond quickly. Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing each muscle group for three to five seconds, and then releasing, helping you to notice the contrast between tension and relaxation. This can be done whilst sat in a comfortable chair, or whilst lying down.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Muscles</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arms and hands</td>
<td>Clench your fists and push your arms straight out in front of you. Tense for three to five seconds, then relax/release the muscles and flop your arms/hands down next to your chair/on your chair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legs and feet</td>
<td>Push your toes downwards, gently raise your legs, and stretch them out in front of you. Tense for three to five seconds, and then relax.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stomach</td>
<td>Push out your tummy muscles, take a breath and hold it for three to five seconds. Then relax the muscles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoulders</td>
<td>Scrunch up your shoulders. Tense for three to five seconds. Then relax.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neck</td>
<td>Push your head back against the chair or bed. Hold for three to five seconds. Then relax.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face</td>
<td>Screw up your face, squeeze your eyes tight and push your lips together. Hold for three to five seconds then relax.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>