

MIGRAINE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Back to school headache

For many children this doesn't just mean new teachers and new friends, but a source of nervousness with homework and tests just around the corner. The latest research conducted by the World Health Organization has shown that 80 % of headaches are caused by muscle tension, which is triggered by stress.

SA Headache Society Chairman Dr Elliot Shevel says "Starting off the year right can help minimize a child's stress levels throughout the year which inevitably means fewer headaches for your child." He advises parents to take note of the following:

- First day stress headache

Having your child feel anxious and stressed on the first day is a surefire way to trigger a headache. Remind your child that he/she is not the only student who is a bit uneasy about the first day of school. Teachers also know that students are anxious and will make an effort to make sure everyone feels as comfortable as possible. Point out the positive aspect of school, such as it being fun and them getting a chance to make new friends. If you feel it appropriate, drive your child to school and pick them up after on the first day.

- Choosing the correct backpack/ posture related headache

Choosing a backpack with wide, padded shoulder straps and padded back. Pack light and organize the backpack to use all of its compartments. Pack heavier items closest to the center of the back. The backpack should never weigh more than 10 to 20 percent of your child's body weight. Always use both shoulder straps as slinging a backpack over one shoulder can strain muscles and lead to muscle tension headache. Consider a rolling backpack; this type of backpack may be a good choice for students who must tote a heavy load. Remember that rolling backpacks still must be carried up stairs.

- Nutritional lunch boxes/ dietary related headache

Nutritious home packed lunches start in the supermarket; use the nutritional facts label to help choose healthy foods. Compare nutrient levels for similar foods. Select those lower in fat, sodium and sugar. Dietary headache is a common affliction. These are usually triggered by foods that assist with energy such as chocolate. Instead of giving your child a chocolate as a sweet treat rather include a fruit. Fruits make a sweet and nutritious contribution to lunch. They are generally rich in vitamin A, vitamin C, fiber and water. Take note of which

foods trigger headaches for your child by keeping a diary and avoid these foods. A Dietary Trigger Diary is available at www.headacheclinic.co.za free of charge to assist you. Remember to remind your child to eat their lunch as skipping meals is a surefire trigger for headaches. Teach them to eat in moderation and enjoy their meals.

- Remember to pack a fruit juice/ dehydration headache

Dehydration is a common trigger, adequate intake of fluid throughout the day to prevent headaches. Select 100% fruit juice, not just any soda drinks. Soda drinks contain mostly caffeine and sugar and are low in nutrients. Caffeine has been known to trigger headaches in children and it is also highly addictive. A better choice is 100% fruit juice or water.

- Taking part in sports/ stretching exercises

Parent should encourage their children to take part in physical activities at school as these are not only great fun, but also an important part of playing and learning. It is also vital for healthy growth and development. Persuading those children who don't enjoy organized sport to take up some other form of everyday physical activity will help them stay healthy. Teach your children the right stretching exercises to stretch the muscles of the head, face, neck and jaw. Stretching should be gentle and soothing, not agonizingly painful. Get your children to stretch their neck and jaw muscles carefully and this will give results. For a free copy of the exercises, contact The Headache Clinic on 0861 678 911. These will help them to stretch the neck and jaw muscles carefully, this will give results.

- When to consult a medical professional

If your child's headache persists, it is imperative that you undergo a multidisciplinary investigation to diagnose the specific factors behind the recurring headache. There are a number of healthier treatment options to medication available right here in South Africa. It is possible to get to the bottom of the problem and resolve the pain permanently so that your child can enjoy the quality of life they deserve.

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