

## Back-to-school headaches

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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 Organisation has shown that 80 percent 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 minimise 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 sure-fire way to trigger a headache. Remind your child that he/she is not the only pupil who is a bit uneasy about the first year 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 appropriate, drive your child to school and pick them up for the first few days.

### Choosing the correct backpack: posture- related headache

Choose a backpack with wide, padded shoulder straps and padded back. Pack light and organise the backpack so that all of its compartments are used. Pack heavier items closest to the centre of the back.

The backpack should never be 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 a muscle-tension headache.

Consider a rolling backpack. This type of backpack may be a good choice for students who carry a heavy load. Remember that rolling backpacks must still be carried upstairs.

### Nutritional lunch boxes: diet-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 headaches are a common affliction and are usually triggered by foods that assist with energy, such as chocolate.



The first day of school can be an anxious experience for children and parents. Picture: Terry Haywood

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, fibre and water.

Take note of which foods trigger headaches by keeping a diary and avoiding these foods.

A Dietary Trigger Diary is available at [www.headacheclinic.co.za](http://www.headacheclinic.co.za) free of charge to assist you. Remember to remind your child to eat their lunch; skipping meals will trigger headaches. Teach them to eat in moderation and to enjoy their meals.

Remember to pack a fruit juice: dehydration headache

Dehydration is a common trigger, so an adequate intake of fluid throughout the day to prevent headaches is important.

Select 100 percent fruit juice, rather than sodas.

Sodas 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 percent fruit juice or water.

Taking part in sports: stretching exercises

Parents 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 children who don't enjoy organised 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 agonisingly painful.

Get your children to stretch their neck and jaw muscles carefully, and this will give results.

When to consult a medical professional

If your child's headache persists, seek help.

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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