

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for Headaches

How can behavioral health help with my child's headaches?

Chronic headaches can be complex conditions that not only cause pain, but can also impact the quality of life for a child and their family. Challenges such as changes in mood, isolation, decreased academic performance, and school absenteeism are common – in addition to pain. Behavioral health providers work alongside neurologists and other medical providers to help:

- Reduce headache pain and intensity
- Improve social functioning
- Reduce school absenteeism
- Reduce stress and anxiety
- Address low mood associated with headache pain

What types of headaches can be treated by behavioral health? Can behavioral health help with other symptoms my child might experience?

Headaches are one of the most common disorders seen in youth. Some headaches may have no identifiable or obvious cause, such as migraine headaches. Other times, headaches may be caused by another medical condition such as sinusitis, a virus, something in the environment a child may be sensitive to, or even an abnormality in the brain. Sometimes additional symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, lightheadedness, and light or noise sensitivity are related to headaches. Regardless of the type of headache, behavioral health can be a part of your child's care team. Behavioral health interventions can also be helpful in managing associated symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and lightheadedness. Some of the types of headaches and associated disorders that we treat include:

- Abdominal migraines
- Cyclical vomiting
- Hemiplegic migraines
- Migraines
- Daily persistent headaches
- Paroxysmal vertigo
- Pseudotumor cerebri (idiopathic intracranial hypertension)
- Tension headaches

What is CBT?

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a brief, evidence-based approach that addresses thoughts, feelings, and actions surrounding headaches and associated symptoms. Youth engaged in CBT learn several strategies including:

- Education about how pain works in the brain and body
- How to identify and manage headache triggers
- How to modify lifestyle factors (hydration, sleep, nutrition, etc.) that may influence headaches
- Strategies to cope with headache pain
 - > Relaxation training
 - > Mindfulness training
 - > Active distraction
 - > Activity pacing
- Goal setting
- Changing the way we think about pain
- Changing the way we respond to pain

How do I access behavioral health services?

Your neurologist may provide a recommendation for CBT. You will then be scheduled for an initial evaluation with one of your behavioral health care providers. During that appointment, your child's therapist will conduct a behavioral health assessment to better understand their specific symptoms and needs. At the end of that assessment, the behavioral health expert will provide specific recommendations and work with you to create an individualized treatment plan for your child.

What types of therapy are available?

Here at UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh we offer two options for CBT for headache management:

- **Individual Psychotherapy:** Brief (6-12 sessions) 1:1 psychotherapy that is tailored to each child's unique needs. Therapy is structured and focuses on coping skill development. Depending on the age, developmental level, and specific needs of each child, caregivers are typically involved in treatment to help their child reach treatment plan goals.
- **The Virtual Comfort Ability Group (VCAPS):** As an alternative to individual therapy, children and their parents can participate in this evidence-based virtual group therapy.

My child also suffers from a psychiatric condition. Will those conditions be treated as well?

Headaches can impact every aspect of a child's life. Youth suffering from headaches do frequently struggle with psychiatric diagnoses such as depression, anxiety, and ADHD. Our behavioral health care providers are uniquely positioned to address the headache portion of your child's care. As a result, treatment here at UPMC Children's is focused upon headache management. However, our program emphasizes the importance of treating every aspect of your child's health care needs. As a part of your child's initial assessment, our behavioral health providers assess for several psychiatric conditions and work to identify any additional behavioral health needs. If appropriate, our providers will work with you and your child, both during the initial assessment and through ongoing therapy, to connect you to additional behavioral health care providers.