Visits to pediatric emergency departments for headache pain in children are on the rise
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There is a growing body of evidence that pediatric emergency departments are seeing a steady increase in the number of children presenting with headaches, as supported by new research to be presented at the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) 2016 National Conference & Exhibition in San Francisco.

Researchers from the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC used data from the electronic medical record to analyze their hospital's emergency department visits for headache pain in children ages 4 to 20 years, from 2007 to 2014. They then randomly selected 50 headache visits per year and examined patient data making sure to include variables such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, chief complaint, head injury within 48 hours, history of concussion, and past medical history.

Between 2007 and 2014 at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC, pediatric emergency department visits for headaches doubled from 2 percent to more than 4 percent, said primary study author Michelle Perry, MD, pediatric resident at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC. During this same time period, the admission rate for children with headache more than doubled from 10 percent of headache visits in 2007 to 24 percent in 2014. Females were more likely to be admitted for headache pain than males.

And while visits increased, the researchers noted that the use of computed tomography (CT) scans has decreased. "Overall, we are performing fewer computed tomography scans, which spares our children from receiving radiation exposure," says Dr. Regina Toto, study co-author and pediatric chief resident at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC. "At the same time, we are providing more medications to children with headaches than we have in the past."

Drs. Perry and Toto commented that their results confirm a significantly increased burden on both the health care system and patients: "it is not uncommon to see patients and parents that have missed significant amounts of school or work because of chronic headaches." They concluded that additional research is needed to determine the cause of the increased rates of visits and admissions as well as developing more effective treatment strategies for these children.

"Our findings show a worrisome trend, and we need to figure out why so many children are ending up in hospitals with headaches," Dr. Toto said.


Provided by American Academy of Pediatrics