

Headache and Brain Tumor



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KEYWORDS

- Pediatric and adult brain tumor • Primary headache • Secondary headache
- Pathophysiology of brain tumor headache • Brain tumor treatment

KEY POINTS

- The majority headache patients will not have a brain tumor. However, the presence of clinical “red flags” should further investigation with neuroimaging.
- Brain tumors are an uncommon cause of headaches in children and adults, however, many brain tumors do present with headache, typically accompanied by other neurological signs and symptoms.
- Recent guidelines from the American College of Radiology are an excellent resource regarding the appropriate the use of neuroimaging for headaches in children and adults.

INTRODUCTION

Headaches are exceedingly common. A highly-cited general population prevalence study by Rasmussen and colleagues¹ found that the lifetime prevalence of headache in any form in the general population was 93% for men and 99% for women, with the point prevalence being 11% for men and 22% for women. Most headaches are primary headache disorders comprised mainly of tension (69%–88%), migraine (6%–25%), and cluster headaches (0.006%–0.24%).^{1,2} Most individuals seeking medical attention for headaches have no serious or life-threatening underlying pathologies,³ but many are concerned about this possibility.⁴ A large case-control study⁵ suggested that isolated headache presenting in the primary care setting did not justify further investigation, because the risk of an underlying brain tumor was too small.

Likewise, the prevalence of asymptomatic brain tumors on neuroimaging studies is similarly low, estimated to be 0.7% (95% confidence interval [CI] 0.47%–0.98%) based on a meta-analysis of 16 studies (n = 19,559).⁶

The term atypical headache can be applied to those that are similar to primary headaches but have atypical features or clinical course. Although there are no definitive prevalence estimates of atypical headaches, one study found that major MR imaging abnormalities were found in 14.1% of atypical headache cases, while they were found in only 1.4% of tension-type and 0.6% of migraine headaches.⁷ As opposed to primary headaches, the term secondary headaches refers to those with underlying pathologies such as intracranial tumor, infection, ruptured aneurysm, or giant cell arteritis. Secondary headaches are far less common than primary headaches.⁸

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This article describes the characteristics of headaches related to brain tumors in adults and children, provides neuroimaging recommendations in headache patients, and discusses the proposed pathophysiology and treatment of brain tumor-related headache.

HEADACHE IN ADULTS WITH BRAIN TUMORS

An underlying brain tumor is one of the most feared etiologies of headache, and, although brain tumors are an uncommon cause of headache,^{9,10} many patients with brain tumors do complain of headaches.¹⁰ The prevalence of headache in brain tumor patients ranges between 32.2% and 71% in unselected cases, and metastatic and primary brain tumors are equally likely to cause headaches.^{11–16} Interestingly, there are anecdotal reports of patients with large intracranial tumors with increased intracranial pressure but no headache symptoms.¹⁰ It is important to keep in mind that brain tumor-related headaches rarely present in isolation.^{11,14,17} These headaches commonly present with other neurologic signs and symptoms like seizures, nausea/vomiting, personality changes, papilledema, blurred vision, and other focal neurologic deficits.^{18,19} A change in the character of the headache, new symptoms, or progression are also concerning for an underlying brain tumor.¹³

The most recent International Classification of Headache Disorders-3²⁰ has defined “headache attributed to intracranial neoplasia” as one that occurs in a patient in whom an intracranial neoplasm has been diagnosed and in whom there is “evidence of causation demonstrated by one or more of the following: headache has developed in temporal relation to the intracranial neoplasia, or led to its discovery; headache has significantly worsened in parallel with worsening of the intracranial neoplasia; headache has significantly improved in temporal relation to successful treatment of the intracranial neoplasia; not better accounted for by another ICHD-3 diagnosis.” The classic brain tumor headache has been described as severe, worse in the morning, and accompanied by nausea and vomiting.¹² An early clinical study of adult brain tumor headache was by Forsyth and Posner¹² in 1993 from Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. They evaluated 111 consecutive brain tumor patients of whom 34% had primary brain tumors, and 66% had metastatic tumors. They found that 48% of primary and metastatic brain tumor patients presented with headaches and that the classic brain tumor headache was actually uncommon in their experience. Headaches were similar to tension-type in

77% of cases, migraine in 9% of cases, and other types in 14% of cases. However, unlike actual tension-type headaches, brain tumor headaches were worse with bending over in 32% of cases, while vomiting was seen 40% of the time. The headaches similar to tension-type headaches were described as dull ache, pressure, and like a sinus headache. Furthermore, larger tumors with contrast enhancement and midline shift were more likely to produce headaches, although the headache characteristics were nonspecific. The headaches were usually described as bilateral, but in those who had unilateral pain, the pain was always on the same side as the brain tumor. This finding was confirmed on a subsequent study from Thailand that found that this was highly predictive in both supra- and infratentorial tumors when there was no evidence of raised intracranial pressure.¹⁵ In cases where intracranial pressure is elevated, tumor localization based on headache location becomes more difficult, likely because of widespread activation of pain receptors of the head.¹⁰ Work from the early 1970s using electrical stimulation to the dura seemed to indicate that pain can be felt throughout the head and neck region.²¹ This supports the general notion that determining tumor location based on headache distribution is imperfect, and with the availability of modern neuroimaging, this question can be easily answered.¹⁰

A 2007 study by Schankin and colleagues¹⁴ of 85 patients with primary and metastatic tumors found that a pre-existing primary headache disorder could predispose to having a secondary brain tumor-related headache. The authors also suggested that an absence of raised intracranial pressure (such as could be seen after steroid treatment) could be responsible for the absence of classic brain tumor findings. They also suggested that glioblastoma patients had more dull headaches, while those with meningioma had pulsating headaches. An important prospective study by Valentinis and colleagues¹⁶ in 2010 in 206 patients found that brain tumor headache prevalence was 47.6% and that the headache was nonspecific in character and that its prevalence differed according to tumor location, volume, and the patient's prior headache history. Like other studies,^{13,15} they also found that infratentorial tumors were more commonly associated with headaches, likely because of the small size of the posterior fossa and CSF flow obstruction.¹⁹

Brain metastases are by far the most common brain tumors in adults, and in adults with a cancer history, a new or changed headache without other neurologic signs or symptoms can be associated with brain metastases in up to

54% of patients.^{18,22} In children with a cancer history and new headache, the risk of intracranial metastatic diseases has been reported to be 12%.²³

SELECTED BRAIN TUMOR HEADACHE SYNDROMES

Although a tumor's type, location, and size may not be predictably related to headache, there are some characteristic headache syndromes that appear to be associated with tumor location.^{24,25}

Metastatic tumors to the skull base can elicit distinct clinical syndromes related to their location:^{19,26}

- Orbital: dull unilateral supraorbital headache, diplopia, ptosis, V1 distribution trigeminal sensory loss
- Parasellar: unilateral frontal headache, V1 distribution sensory loss, diplopia, and ocular paresis
- Occipital condyle: severe unilateral occipital pain worsened with neck flexion and unilateral tongue paralysis
- Jugular foramen: unilateral retroauricular pain, IX to XI cranial nerve paralysis, hoarseness, and dysphagia
- Gasserian ganglion syndrome: trigeminal neural-like pain in forehead, cheek or jaw, and V2 or V3 distribution sensory loss

Trigeminal autonomic cephalgias (TACs) are primary headache syndromes comprised of severe short-lasting headaches along with paroxysmal facial autonomic symptoms.²⁷ Pituitary tumors have an unusual association with TACs, and so those presenting with this uncommon headache disorder should be considered for further work-up.²⁵ In another context related to the pituitary gland, pituitary apoplexy is a well-known severe consequence of infarction/hemorrhage of a pituitary tumor. This is classically associated with acute severe headache, sometimes characterized as thunderclap, along with focal neurologic deficits including visual loss and potentially death from pituitary insufficiency.^{28–33} Urgent surgery and glucocorticoid therapy are important to avoid serious complications; however, those with asymptomatic apoplexy may have good outcomes with tumor-specific and steroid treatments.^{33,34}

Several cystic intracranial masses merit discussion. Colloid cysts classically produce severe acute headaches relieved by positional changes,³⁵ although more recent studies suggest that they more commonly cause intermittent

diffuse headaches, often unrelated to position.³⁶ Acute obstruction at the foramen of Monro can be associated with severe consequences including death due to hydrocephalus.²⁸ Other cystic intracranial lesions such as antero-inferior middle cranial fossa arachnoid cysts may produce a nummular headache (left temporal headache location).³⁷ Supra- and intrasellar arachnoid cysts may produce unilateral cluster headache,³⁸ and large right frontal arachnoid cysts without hydrocephalus can produce occipital orgasmic headache.³⁹ When pineal cysts grow large enough to produce hydrocephalus, they may produce headache; however, it is theorized that those that are too small to result in hydrocephalus may still produce headache. After pinealectomy, these patients may still complain of unilateral headache with or without autonomic features and visual symptoms.⁴⁰ Melatonin is thought to have anti-inflammatory properties, and it is thought that tumors that infiltrate the pineal gland like germinoma can result in a decrease in melatonin, while other tumors like pinealoblastoma and pinealocytoma may actually increase levels of melatonin.⁴¹ Other intracranial masses such as dermoid/epidermoid tumors and craniopharyngiomas may produce headache secondary to a chemical meningitis secondary to a rupture of their contents into the CSF.^{37–39}

NEUROIMAGING RECOMMENDATIONS IN ADULTS WITH HEADACHE

Evaluation of the adult headache patient begins with a thorough history and physical examination. A useful resource regarding the use of neuroimaging in a headache patient is the American College of Radiology (ACR) Appropriateness Criteria Headache,⁴² which provides evidence-based guidelines for physicians. The ACR recommends that most patients who present with non-traumatic, uncomplicated primary headache do not need neuroimaging. However, those who present with concerning red flags based on history or physical examination should be considered for neuroimaging to exclude an underlying secondary cause like a brain tumor. It is important for the physician to consider other serious intracranial disorders that could result in headache.²⁵ These are outlined in **Box 1**.

For patients with chronic headache, the ACR recommends that new headache features and/or focal neurologic signs/symptoms could suggest an underlying brain tumor, aneurysm, or vascular malformation, and in these cases contrast-enhanced brain MR imaging should be

Box 1**Differential diagnoses to consider other than brain tumor in a headache patient**

Other space-occupying processes (eg, hematoma or abscess)

Subarachnoid hemorrhage

Infection including encephalitis, meningitis

Traumatic head injury

Serious otolaryngologic and ophthalmologic causes of headache

Stroke (intracerebral hemorrhage, infarction, cerebral venous thrombosis)

Temporal arteritis

considered.⁴² Other situations where neuroimaging may be indicated is with new headache in immunosuppressed or cancer patients because of the increased risk of infection or brain tumor. Various publications have proposed clinical red flags that should raise the suspicion of a serious underlying cause including brain tumor.^{10,25,43} These are summarized in **Box 2**.

HEADACHE IN CHILDREN WITH BRAIN TUMORS

Brain tumors are the most common solid tumors of childhood and the leading cause of cancer death from ages 0 to 14 years in the United States.^{44,45} The clinical presentation of pediatric brain tumors has been less studied than in adults.⁴⁶ Children with brain tumors frequently present with headaches, although their presentation may be less clear or complete relative to adults.⁴⁷ Brain tumor headaches in children, as in adults, are often associated with other neurologic signs and symptoms¹⁴ (**Box 1**). Early diagnosis is critical to improving outcomes, but pediatric brain tumors are often initially misdiagnosed as more common pediatric disorders like migraine, gastroenteritis, or psychological/behavioral conditions.⁴⁸ Similarly, given the lack of pathognomonic clinical features of brain tumors in children, there has been no significant change in the prediagnostic interval in the last several decades despite widespread availability of computed tomography (CT) and MR imaging.

A large series⁴⁶ of 200 children with brain tumors found that the most common initial presenting symptoms were headache (41%), vomiting (12%), unsteadiness (11%), visual difficulties (10%), educational/behavioral problems (10%) and seizures (9%). The most common symptoms

Box 2**Clinical red flags warranting further evaluation with neuroimaging**

Headaches that occur immediately after waking at night or awaken patient repeatedly from sleep

Headache with new neurologic signs

Headache that is progressive

Acute headache or persistent headache without associated family history of migraine

Acute new, usually severe, headache or headache that has changed from prior headaches

Acute headache following strenuous exercise

Headache associated with fever or other systemic symptoms

Headache with meningismus

Headache with Valsalva maneuver (by bending down, coughing, sneezing, or straining)

New headache in an adult, especially over 50 years of age

New headache in the elderly or children

Headaches not characteristic of primary headaches

Headaches associated with vomiting/nausea without migraine

Blurred vision, diplopia, papilledema

New or changed headache in a cancer patient

Chronic headaches occurring with substantial disorientation, confusion, or emesis

Unilateral headache associated with contralateral neurologic symptoms

Focal neurologic symptoms other than sensory or visual aura

occurring at any time were headache (56%), vomiting (51%), and educational or behavioral problems (44%). Eighty-eight percent of subjects had neurologic signs at diagnosis including papilledema (38%), cranial nerve abnormalities (49%), cerebellar signs (48%), long tract signs (27%), somatosensory abnormalities (11%), and reduced level of consciousness (12%). More than 1 sign or symptom was present at the time of diagnosis except for seizures. Other older large series also found that children with brain tumors typically have other neurologic signs and symptoms in addition to headache.^{49,50} A recent review has summarized common physical examination findings in pediatric brain tumor patients (**Box 3**).⁴⁸

Despite the fact that brain tumors are the most common solid tumors of childhood, only rarely

Box 3**Common physical examination findings in children with brain tumors****Cranial Nerves**

Nystagmus

Facial palsy

Double vision

Reduced hearing

Abnormal eye movement

Difficulty swallowing

Head tilt

Deviation of tongue

Others

Paresis

Hyper/o reflexia

Increased/decreased muscle tone

Positive Romberg sign

Dysmetria

Heel-knee-shin ataxia

Papilledema

Clonus

will a child with a headache actually have a brain tumor. In a series of 105 children younger than 6 years with chronic and recurrent headaches, Raieli and colleagues⁵¹ found only 3 (2.85%) cases with brain tumors. Another series of 104 children younger than 7 years with headache, the most common reason was migraine, and no brain tumor was found in their patients.⁵² In a large series of 815 children younger than 18 years with chronic headache, Abu-Arafah and Macleod⁵³ reported only 2 patients with brain tumors. A relatively recent series of 51 children with craniopharyngioma found that 78% of their subjects reported headache and that this was associated with hydrocephalus, distortion of circle of Willis, and large tumor volume.⁵⁴ Both distortion of the circle of Willis and large tumor volume were also associated with greater frequency and severity of headaches.

NEUROIMAGING RECOMMENDATIONS IN CHILDREN WITH HEADACHE

Although an actual underlying brain tumor is rare in a child, headaches can understandably result in enough concern from a clinician or parent to warrant neuroimaging.^{55,56} As with adults, a thorough history and physical examination are vital in order

to elicit whether red flags (see **Box 1**) are present. As with adults, the ACR recently published its evidenced-based guidelines regarding neuroimaging of children with headaches.⁵⁶

The most common types of headache in children are primary headaches such as migraine or tension headaches. However, pediatric migraine headaches may differ from those in adults (eg, they may be of shorter duration in children).^{57,58} The neuroimaging yield of clinically significant findings in pediatric patients with primary headaches is low.^{55,59–63} Younger children are more likely to have secondary headaches, and while most have a benign cause, chronic progressive headaches, along with abnormal physical examination findings, could indicate an underlying brain tumor.^{51,64} Imaging should be considered in those with nonspecific symptoms and normal physical examination results if there is not typical resolution of symptoms.⁴⁸ Urgent imaging should be particularly considered in those with paresis and unsteadiness. A summary of general guidelines for neuroimaging of headache that incorporates the ACR guidelines,^{42,56} the American Academy of Neurology and Child Neurology Society,⁶⁵ and systematic review of neuroimaging in childhood headache⁵⁵ are summarized in **Box 4**.

Box 4**Recommendations for neuroimaging in children with headache**

- Neuroimaging is usually not appropriate for the initial imaging of primary headache in children.
- In cases of secondary headache, noncontrast-enhanced brain MR imaging is usually appropriate, and a contrast-enhanced examination should be obtained if the noncontrast examination is abnormal.
- There are tradeoffs regarding the use of CT versus MR imaging in the neuroimaging of children. Children are exposed ionizing radiation with CT, while sedation or general anesthesia is sometimes needed for MR imaging examinations in children younger than 6 years. Given this, careful consideration is needed, and neuroimaging should be conducted in only those children with suspicious history and physical examination findings that point to serious intracranial pathology.
- If brain MR imaging reveals a brain tumor in a child, a contrast-enhanced MR imaging of the entire spine to exclude drop metastasis should be considered, especially for tumors of the posterior fossa.

PATHOPHYSIOLOGY OF HEADACHE IN BRAIN TUMORS

The brain parenchyma itself is insensitive to pain because it lacks pain receptors. However, the tissues covering the cranium, including the periosteum of the skull, muscles, vessels, skin/subcutaneous tissues; eye, ear paranasal sinuses, and nasal cavity; dural venous sinuses; pia arachnoid and dura mater; trigeminal, glossopharyngeal, vagus, and first 3 cervical nerves are sensitive to mechanical stimulation.¹⁷ It is generally thought that displacement and traction of these sensitive intracranial structures underlie brain tumor-related headaches. Raised intracranial pressure results in traction due to brain tumor edema, tumor expansion, and hemorrhage.⁶⁶ The clinicoradiologic correlates of increased intracranial pressure including midline shift, papilledema, and peritumoral edema are typically associated with poorly localized diffuse headaches.^{12,13} However, this relationship is imperfectly understood, and further work, including that focusing on serologic, cerebral, and CSF factors is needed to better define the pathophysiology.¹⁰

Brain tumor headaches can sometimes be intense but temporary because of transitory ventricular system obstruction from the tumor induced by exertion, postural change, Valsalva maneuver, and coughing.¹⁰ An abnormal cerebrovascular autoregulatory response to vasodilation related to raised intracranial pressure and/or space-occupying event is another postulated mechanism of acute brain tumor headaches.¹⁰

The growth rate of brain tumors can also influence the characteristics of headaches.^{13,19,66} Because slow-growing tumors can allow adaptation to mass effect, they can produce transitory headaches later in the disease process. On the other hand, fast-growing tumors do not allow adaptation and so can result in intense, sharp pain.

Brain tumor location may also impact whether a headache is produced. Brain tumors that are midline, intraventricular, and posterior fossa in location are generally known to result in headaches due to CSF flow obstruction.^{11,13,15,66} Although cranial nerves and cervical nerve roots are sensitive to pain, nerve compression itself is rarely thought to result in brain tumor headache.¹¹ However, when cervical nerve compression appears to be associated with brain tumor headache, it can be seen along with the presence of myofascial trigger points and muscle tenderness, likely triggered by external pressure or neck movements.¹⁰

In certain situations, little or no direct mass effect on pain-sensitive structures from tumors

might result in brain tumor headaches. This is thought to be due to endocrinological etiologies, such as with pituitary tumors where somatostatin and dopamine may have a potential proprioceptive role in the development of headache.^{67,68} Other publications posit that pituitary tumors cause headaches because of a cavernous sinus invasion and dural stretching.⁶⁹ Other possible causes of brain tumor headaches include substances produced by brain tumors such as tachykinin (substance P), calcitonin gene-related peptide, nitric oxide synthase, tumor necrosis factor alpha, and vasoactive intestinal peptide.²⁴

Finally, the treatment of brain tumors itself can result in headache, and these factors are summarized in **Box 5**.⁷⁰ Several surgical series have reported a high incidence of postcraniotomy headache, both immediately and remote,^{71–75} especially in the case of retrosigmoid craniotomy.⁷⁶ Radiation therapy of the brain can result in immediate or remote headache and can be associated with worsening of neurologic function.⁷⁷ Cerebral radiation necrosis can occur months to years after initial treatment and can be associated with focal neurologic deficits and headache.²⁵ In high-grade glioma patients treated with temozolomide chemoradiation, increased edema and contrast-enhancement immediately after treatment can worsen symptoms and result in headaches.⁷⁸ Temozolomide itself has also been associated with headache in glioblastoma patients.⁷⁹ Other agents used in the treatment of brain tumors such as corticosteroids and anti-nausea agents like ondansetron⁸⁰ and bevacizumab⁸¹ are also known to result in headaches.

TREATMENT OF BRAIN TUMOR HEADACHES

For brain tumor patients with headache, treatment of the underlying neoplasm improves the headache in most cases.^{13,16,82,83} Because patients

Box 5

Brain tumor treatment factors associated with headache

- Craniotomy
- Radiation therapy – both acute and remote, including radiation necrosis
- Chemotherapy agents (eg, temozolomide)
- Corticosteroids
- Bevacizumab
- Antinausea agents (eg, ondansetron)

with a history of a primary headache disorder more commonly suffer from brain tumor-related headaches,^{12,16} if a headache appears to be primary, rather than secondary in a brain tumor patient, conventional therapy for the primary headache is warranted.²⁵ Medical therapy with analgesics and opiates is commonly used,^{24,25} and in cases with highly aggressive brain malignancies, adequate pain control is central to quality of life. Control of hydrocephalus with intracranial pressure monitoring and ventricular shunting and management of cerebral edema are key initial treatment strategies before chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or surgical therapy.²⁴ Corticosteroid treatment for cerebral edema can result in substantial transient improvement of headache. In patients with cerebral metastases, whole-brain radiation may improve headache symptoms and decrease corticosteroid usage.^{84,85} Surgical resection or stereotactic radiosurgery for those with a few metastases can also result in control of headache.^{86–88}

SUMMARY

Most headache patients will not have life-threatening illnesses like a brain tumor. However, the clinician must perform a careful history and physical examination for the presence of red flags that would warrant neuroimaging. Brain tumors are an uncommon cause of headaches in children and adults; however, many brain tumors do present with headache, typically accompanied by other neurologic signs and symptoms. Early diagnosis of pediatric brain tumors remains especially difficult, because they can be initially misdiagnosed as more common benign disorders. Generally, the treatment of the underlying brain tumor improves the headache; however, these therapies may also induce headaches. The recent evidence-based guidelines from the ACR^{42,56} serve as an excellent resource for clinicians regarding the use neuroimaging for headaches in children and adults.

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