

Chiari Is Not A Common Cause Of Headaches In Children

Although headaches are a common symptom of Chiari, a recent study from Turkey found that Chiari is rarely the cause of pediatric headaches. The purpose of the study was to see how often something of “clinical significance” is found on MRI ordered for headaches in children. However, since Chiari was one of the clinically significant findings we can see where it fits into the larger picture of pediatric headaches.

The study looked at 1008 children aged 3-17 years who were seen over a two-year period at a neurology clinic. The average age of the children was 12 years and 63% were female. Forty-four percent had experienced headaches for less than three months, while 19% had experienced headaches for more than a year. Headache duration was spread fairly evenly from minutes per bout to more than 8 hours. About a quarter of the group experienced headaches more than 15 days per month and for 17% of the children, their headaches disrupted their sleep.

Despite the fact that 96% of the children had completely normal neurological exams, MRIs were performed on 908 of them. Clinically significant findings were seen on less than 4% of the MRIs, with sinusitis and arachnoid cysts being the most common. Only 7 children (<1%) were found to have Chiari, which was even less than pseudotumor cerebri (21 children). The paper did not report how many, if any, of the Chiari children ended up having surgery or whether their headaches improved over time.

Overall, migraines, tension headaches, and sinusitis were the most frequent types of headaches, but the authors stress that headaches with abnormal findings on neurological exam should result in an MRI as well as headaches that disrupt sleep.

Source: Üstün C, Öncel EP, Menderes D, et al. The Role of Neuroimaging in Diagnosing Pediatric Headaches: Insights From a Large Cohort Study. *J Child Neurol*. Published online March 16, 2026. doi:10.1177/08830738261422875

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