

Is Your Child's Stomach Pain All In His Head?

We all know there are times that kids seem to complain of a stomach ache to get out of chores or going to school. Don't be so sure that the pain they feel is all in their minds. We're learning more now about a condition called 'functional abdominal pain' that is experienced by millions of kids every day.

Like many teenagers, Kyle Brust makes it a point to do his homework as soon as he gets home. Unlike most, Kyle often did his with a crippling stomach ache. In fact, the pain often started while he was at school, but getting help there was getting harder.

"Some of my teachers wouldn't let me go, because I'd asked so many times before and they thought I was trying to get out of class," says Kyle.

Kyle's mom Marilyn says she couldn't blame the teachers, after all, she'd taken him to the doctor several times herself, and even they couldn't find anything wrong.

"You know, you're running the tests and nothing's coming up. So, is it in his head, is he just an overlystressful child? It was just frustrating because we're not finding any answers," says Marilyn.

It turns out Kyle was suffering from a condition known as functional abdominal pain, that affects as many as one out of every ten kids in this country. Even though the cause of the pain may not be obvious, there are real consequences.

"It really does hurt, and these kids really do suffer," says Dr. Campo, MD at Nationwide Children's Hospital. To help them, Campo is looking into a new approach. He's conducting clinical trials of an anti-depressant that changes the way the body handles a chemical called serotonin. In a preliminary study*, Dr. Campo found that in about eight out of ten cases, the drug normally used to treat emotional pain worked to ease the pain in the stomach.

"We think about it as being important in anxiety and depression and that's all quite true, but what's really interesting is that 95% of our body's serotonin is in our gut," says Campo.

Campo believes these kids have extremely sensitive intestines, and controlling the effects of serotonin may help ease the pain. It seemed to work for Kyle, who is now completely pain free for the first time in years.

The latest round of tests continues, but in the meantime doctors say if your child complains about stomachaches consistently, you may want to have them checked out.

Functional abdominal pain can affect everything from a child's grades to their social lives, and often comes with other problems like chest pains or migraine headaches.

"Citalopram Treatment of Pediatric Recurrent Abdominal Pain and Comorbid Internalizing Disorders: An Exploratory Study", Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, vol. 43, no. 10, October 2004 Ohio State University