

My head hurts: body, doctor and advice

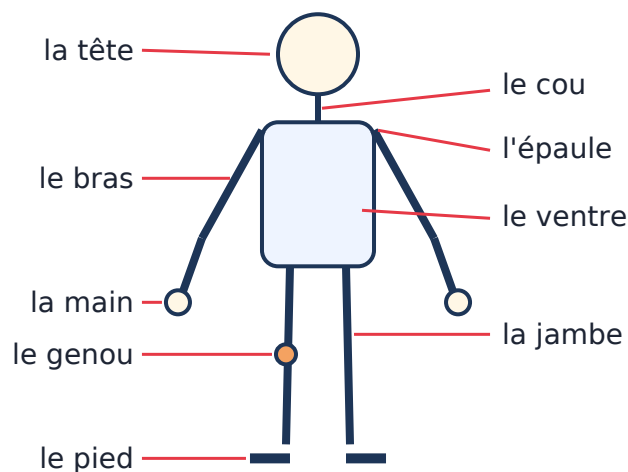
French 2 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: To say something hurts in French, use avoir mal à plus the body part with its article: j'ai mal à la tête, j'ai mal au dos, j'ai mal aux pieds. The word à merges with le (au) and les (aux). To give advice, use the imperative (Bois de l'eau !) or il faut plus an infinitive.

Level: French 2 (high school, ACTFL Novice High) · **Standards:** ACTFL Novice High, WL 1.1 Interpersonal, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational

What are the main body-part words in French?

Learn each body part with its article, because gender matters when you say that something hurts.



The body: nine words to know first.

Masculine or plural	Feminine
le dos — back	la gorge — throat
les dents — teeth	la bouche — mouth
les yeux — eyes	l'oreille — ear
le nez — nose	l'estomac (m.) — stomach

How do you say that something hurts?

Avoir mal à

Conjugate avoir, then add mal à and the body part with its article. The preposition à merges

with le and les: à + le = au, à + les = aux. Before la and a vowel it stays à la and à l'.

Examples

J'ai mal **à la** tête. — I have a headache.

Maëlle a mal **au** dos. — Maëlle's back hurts.

Mes frères ont mal **aux** pieds. — My brothers' feet hurt.

Tu as mal **à l'**oreille ? — Does your ear hurt?

Common mistake

English uses a possessive ("my head"), but French uses the article: j'ai mal à la tête, never j'ai mal à ma tête. Also say j'ai mal, not je suis mal.

Other symptoms use different structures. You say j'ai de la fièvre (I have a fever), je tousse (I am coughing), je suis enrhumé or enrhumée (I have a cold) and je suis fatigué or fatiguée (I am tired). To ask a friend how they feel, say Ça va ? Qu'est-ce que tu as ? — Are you okay? What is wrong?

How do you talk to the doctor and give advice?

Useful words: le médecin (doctor), le rendez-vous (appointment), l'ordonnance (prescription), le médicament (medicine), le comprimé (tablet), le sirop (syrup), la fièvre (fever), tousser (to cough).

ORDONNANCE · Dr Perrin

Patiente : Jade Nguyen

1. Sirop contre la toux : matin et soir
2. Un comprimé le soir avec de l'eau
3. Repos : trois jours à la maison

A short prescription, as it is written in French.

Advice

Use the imperative: Bois de l'eau ! Prends ce sirop. Va chez le médecin. Add ne ... pas to forbid: Ne mange pas de bonbons. For general advice use il faut + infinitive: Il faut dormir huit heures.

Culture note

French pharmacies display a flashing green cross. Pharmacists can advise you for small problems, and a night pharmacy is called une pharmacie de garde. In an emergency, you dial 15 or 112.

Zoé's tip

Learn the pair as one chunk: au dos, à la gorge, aux dents. And for -er verbs, the tu command just drops the s: tu manges → mange !

Key points to remember

- Avoir mal à + article + body part: j'ai mal à la gorge, au ventre, aux dents.
- À + le = au and à + les = aux; à la and à l' do not change.
- French uses the article, not a possessive: j'ai mal à la tête, not à ma tête.
- The tu imperative of -er verbs drops the final s: mange, repose, reste.
- Il faut + infinitive gives general advice: il faut dormir, il faut boire de l'eau.

My Head Hurts: Body, Doctor and Advice: frequently asked questions

How do you say 'I have a headache' in French?

Say J'ai mal à la tête. The pattern is avoir mal à plus the body part with its article. The same pattern works for all other parts: j'ai mal au ventre, j'ai mal aux dents.

When do you use au, à la, à l' and aux with avoir mal?

Use au before a masculine singular noun (au dos), à la before a feminine one (à la gorge), à l' before a vowel (à l'oreille) and aux before any plural (aux pieds).

How do you form the tu imperative of an -er verb?

Take the tu form of the present tense and drop the final s: tu manges becomes mange, tu restes becomes reste. Irregular verbs differ: tu prends becomes prends, tu bois becomes bois, tu vas becomes va.

What does 'il faut' mean and how is it used?

Il faut means one must or it is necessary. It is followed by an infinitive for general advice: il faut boire de l'eau, il faut se reposer.

What is the difference between a médecin and a pharmacien?

The médecin examines you and writes the ordonnance. The pharmacien works at the pharmacie, gives you the médicaments and can advise on minor problems.