

Lifting The Burden

The Global Campaign against Headache

A collaboration between the World Health Organization, non-governmental organisations, academic institutions and individuals worldwide

Information for people affected by headache: doing the most to help yourself

Headache disorders are real – they are not just in the mind.

People with headaches often feel worried, helpless and frustrated. Even though some headache disorders cannot be cured, it is very important to remember that they are treatable. There are many medical treatment options available today, and there are also things that YOU can do to help reduce the frequency and severity of your headaches and improve the quality of your life.

Your feeling of control over your life and your headaches is called "self-efficacy". It is essential in order to live the best life you can. The purpose of this leaflet is to tell you about the things you can do on your own. They will help you work with your doctor or health-care provider to get the best results for you.

What is headache?

Headache is a symptom – a type of pain. It can happen on its own or with other symptoms such as nausea (feeling sick). It is very common, affecting men and women of all ages around the world. In some countries, 9 out of every 10 men and 19 of every 20 women have had at least one headache in the past year.

A person has a *headache disorder* when headaches are frequent enough to be a nuisance. Headache disorders can be much more than a nuisance, and completely spoil a person's life. There are several types of headache disorders, including tension-type, migraine and cluster headache. Each type has a different pattern and different causes. Separate leaflets are available on each of these.

Headache can also be a symptom of another underlying disease (so-called secondary headache). When this is the case, the underlying disease has to be treated rather than the headache itself. Before giving you this leaflet, your doctor will have confirmed from your description of your headache, and by physical examination (and occasionally by carrying out tests or investigations), that you do not have secondary headache.

How can headaches affect my life?

Pain makes it difficult to do things. If this happens a lot, it becomes hard to maintain a normal lifestyle. It may be impossible to keep plans. Eventually, it can seem pointless to make plans that then have to be cancelled. This can affect work, family and social life and hobbies and enjoyable activities, spoil career prospects and damage relationships with people close to you. In children, headache can get in the way of school, sports and time with friends. In these ways

headache disorders affect the lives of not only the people who actually have them but also their family, friends and colleagues at work.

It is common for people who have frequent or severe headaches and suffer some of these consequences to feel anger, frustration, depression, worry, helplessness and hopelessness. If this is the case for you, the following information may help you take control and start the journey to getting your life back. This is almost always possible. Some people may benefit from professional help, but in all cases **you** must also take action. Your feeling of control over your life and your headaches is called "self-efficacy". It is essential in order to live the best life you can.

What can I do to control my headaches?

If you have been diagnosed with one of these types of headache, the first thing **you** should do is learn about **your** specific diagnosis, what to expect, what treatments are available and how **you** can help to make sure these treatments work as well as they can. There are separate leaflets available on each of the common headache types. Your doctor, or a pharmacist, may have recommended medications. Always follow instructions when taking these. Used wrongly, at best they will not work and at worst they can make you more ill.

In addition, there are many things **you** can do, not involving medication, that can help reduce the frequency, severity and impact of your headaches on your life. The most important are:

1. identify your triggers, if you have any, and avoid them where possible;
2. maintain a healthy lifestyle;
3. practise relaxation and stress-management techniques; and
4. seek professional help when necessary.

What is meant by "triggers"?

Many headaches start in the brain, although different types of headache may have different causes. Some are inherited. Some follow predictable patterns, while other types of headache occur at random, with no apparent cause. Certain types, especially tension-type headache and migraine, may be brought on by factors – circumstances or events – that set off the process that results in a headache developing. These are called *triggers*. They include stress, relaxation after a stressful period (which surprises many people), too much or too little sleep, missing meals, crossing time zones, bright lights or sustained loud noise, weather changes and certain foods such as cheese and some alcoholic drinks. In many women, hormonal changes at the start of the monthly period may trigger migraine.

Underlying the mechanism of triggers is that some people are more prone to headache attacks than others, and each person may be more prone at some times than at others. This is called the *attack threshold*: the higher your threshold the less likely you are to develop an attack whilst the lower your threshold the more at risk you are. A trigger will set off an attack (although we do not understand how this occurs) more easily if your threshold is low. If your threshold is high, two or three triggers may need to occur together for this to happen.

Separate from triggers are *predisposing factors*. These have the effect of lowering your threshold, so that triggers work more readily. Tiredness, stress and anxiety, and hunger can have this effect, as can menstruation and pregnancy in women.

Headache triggers differ from person to person and according to headache type. They can even vary from time to time within one individual person. Not everybody has identifiable triggers. Yours, if you have any, may depend on whether you are male or female, on where you live or work, on your lifestyle and on a range of other personal factors. It is important to recognise **your** personal headache triggers if you can because it may be possible to remove them from your life. Some advice on trigger-avoidance is given below, in the section **What is**

a healthy lifestyle? Some triggers – such as stress – often cannot be avoided but **you** can change the impact it has on you.

One effective way of doing this is not to allow triggers to come together: if you had a late night, do not miss breakfast, for example.

What are my triggers?

Everyone wants to know what might trigger his or her headaches. This is often difficult and sometimes impossible to pin down, and, as mentioned already, not everybody has triggers.

The best way to find them is to keep a *headache diary* (you can find a sample of a headache diary at www.l-t-b.org). Rather than rely on memory, keep a daily record of when you have a headache along with notes of what and when you eat and drink, when you sleep, your menstrual cycle if you are a women, medications you take, events and changes at work or in your social life and those in the environment such as marked weather variations. This can be very tedious but, if you do it carefully for one to two months, it is likely to reveal triggers that are important for **you**.

The test is then to eliminate them. If you can do this, your headaches should show improvement if they really are triggers. If, on the other hand, avoiding them makes no or very little difference, then probably they are not triggers for you and there is then no need to continue avoiding them.

When triggers are impossible to eliminate (for example, some causes of stress, or weather changes), you will want to maintain a *healthy lifestyle* and use the other techniques described below to help avoid headaches, or reduce the pain and duration of a headache once it has started.

What is a healthy lifestyle?

To a large extent, what doctors refer to as a healthy lifestyle includes maintaining a regular schedule and avoiding headache triggers. But it goes beyond this to include living in a way that promotes better health generally. This is also good for headache prevention.

Below are some of the most common headache triggers, and some suggestions for maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Diet and nutrition

A good nutritious diet consists of well-balanced meals taken regularly throughout the day and including breakfast. Skipping a meal or waiting too long to eat, or becoming dehydrated, can trigger a headache.

Different cultures put their meals together in different ways and with different staple constituents. But, wherever you are, *well-balanced* ideally means including a mix of fruits and vegetables, lean meats, poultry or fish and healthy grains. There is nothing wrong with a vegetarian diet, provided that there is some other source of protein. A good diet avoids, whenever possible, over-processed or preserved foods. Many of these contain additives that can trigger headache. A good diet also consists of appropriately sized portions, as maintaining a healthy weight is a very important for people with headache disorders.

The role of specific foods in triggering headaches is often overstated, but some alcoholic drinks (particularly red wine) can certainly do so. So can too much caffeine. In addition, some people find that other foods – certain mature cheeses and processed foods, for example – will trigger headache. Amongst additives, monosodium glutamate (MSG) can cause problems.

To identify dietary triggers, you may want to keep a food diary for a month, noting what foods you ate during the 12 hours before a headache began. If you think you have found a

food trigger, again the test is to eliminate it and observe the effect. If your headaches improve, continue to avoid it. If, on the other hand, this makes no or very little difference, it probably is not a trigger for you and there is no point in continuing to avoid it. Do not be surprised if you fail to find any food triggers.

Sleep

If you are prone to headaches, good and regular sleep is important. Healthy sleep habits include avoiding too much caffeine, especially late in the day, and ensuring that where you sleep is as dark and quiet as possible. Most adults believe that 7-8 hours of sleep per night is enough, but this is not so for everyone. You should pay attention to your own body to learn **your** own sleep needs. Whatever they are, a regular sleep and wake cycle is always good, both during the week and at weekends. It may seem pleasant to sleep late at weekends, but this is a well-recognised headache trigger. If you've made sure of enough sleep during the week, there should be no need to catch up!

Environmental factors

Bright or flickering lights, sustained loud noise, strong smells and perfumes and changes in the weather including a drop in barometric pressure (which often occurs before a storm) may trigger a headache. You may not be able to control all of these factors, but perhaps there are changes you can make in your home or at work to lessen or avoid some of them.

Some people keep an eye mask and ear plugs to hand, finding that they can stop or relieve a headache if they lie down in a dark, quiet room and relax or sleep.

Psychological and emotional factors

Stress, perhaps coupled with or caused by multiple demands in people's lives, is often the factor most responsible for troublesome headaches in someone already prone to headache.

While it may not be possible to remove stress from your life, or even greatly reduce the amount of it, you can learn ways to manage stress. Organize your time, learn to say "no" to unrealistic demands, ask for help when necessary and teach your family and friends the importance of your taking care of yourself. Try to schedule some time during each day to relax both your body and mind. If possible, include in this time some exercise such as a walk or a yoga class. Relaxation does not come naturally to many people, but often requires no more than deep breathing or imagining yourself sitting on a beautiful, tropical beach whilst you are sitting at your desk. See the section **Relaxation and stress management** for more information on the techniques that you can do on your own.

If you have high levels of stress or depression you may also benefit from seeking assistance from a health-care provider or trusted advisor in your community.

Lifestyle factors

Intense exercise, late nights, long-distance travel (especially across time zones), in fact anything that is stressful, can trigger your headaches. Again, it may not be possible always to avoid these factors, and sometimes you may not want to. It is a mistake to make your life dull and boring to avoid headaches: if you feel the need to do that, then you should be seeing a doctor about them. For some people, however, a careful review of all areas of lifestyle – work, family and social – and general pace of life can lead to changes that bring better health and relief from headaches. Whenever making decisions, always consider which is the healthier option: choosing this will help you avoid headache attacks.

Hormonal factors (for women)

Many women find that their headaches tend to occur during certain times of their menstrual cycle, often just before or at the beginning of their menstrual bleeding. A headache diary

kept for three months, noting the timings of your headaches and your periods, will show whether or not they are related. If so, you should talk to your doctor about treatment options. In addition, all of the factors discussed above may still be important as you may be more vulnerable to triggers during times of hormonal fluctuation (such as before or during your period). Maintaining a healthy lifestyle and diet, a regular schedule including sleep and exercise, and stress management and relaxation will all be particularly important for you during this time each month.

Pregnancy is a special time. Periods of course stop during pregnancy, although other hormonal changes take place. Many women find that headaches continue early in pregnancy, but feel much better as the pregnancy progresses.

There is a separate leaflet available on headache and female hormones. Please ask for it if you think it will be helpful.

Relaxation and stress management

When you are tense your body activates the sympathetic nervous system, or "flight or fight" response. This state was important to our survival long ago, but in today's world may merely make you more tense and vulnerable to a headache. The goal of relaxation training is to learn how to control this response and make your body release chemicals and brain signals that relax your body and mind. Some medications have this effect, but may also have unwanted side effects. You can train your body and brain to relax without drugs.

There are several ways to achieve this state. A few, which you can practise on your own, are described below. They all involve relaxation, with slower more regular breathing, slower and regular heart beat, improved circulation (which you can feel as warmer hands and feet) and reduced muscle tension.

Whichever of these you use, there is increasing awareness of the importance of what is called "mindfulness".

"Mindfulness"

Even when we are relaxing, our minds are not at rest. We continually mull over past actions, and anticipate how these may affect the future. We build and hang onto these thought chains like a dog with a bone, and invariably they raise our levels of stress and anxiety.

Mindfulness is, essentially, "living in the moment" – not dwelling on the past or on future uncertainties. When you are practising deep breathing, just concentrate on the present moment and focus your mind on your breathing. If your mind starts racing, simply view your thoughts as what they are – just thoughts. Then refocus on being in the moment.

Deep (or diaphragmatic) breathing

All relaxation techniques begin with deep breathing, using the diaphragm to increase air intake. The diaphragm is a large muscle located at the base of the lungs. Your abdominal muscles help move the diaphragm and give you more power to fill and empty your lungs. When you are tense or anxious you may notice that your breathing is shallow, and only your chest is moving. Increase your breathing so that your stomach is expanding with each breath.

To begin, place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach. Notice which hand is moving. Breathe in slowly and deeply, through your nose, into your abdomen to push up on your hands as much as feels comfortable. Your chest should only move a little while your stomach should expand like a balloon. Breathe out through your mouth, making a quiet, relaxing, whooshing sound like the wind as you blow gently out. Your mouth, tongue and jaw will already be relaxed. Take long, slow, deep breaths, which raise and lower the hand on your abdomen. Focus on your lower abdomen (belly) and imagine a small balloon in that space; breathe in slowly and deeply through the nose, imagining the balloon inflating slowly; hold for

a few seconds; slowly breathe out through the mouth, imagining the balloon gently deflating; repeat 10 or more times. Focus on the sound and feeling of breathing as you become more and more relaxed.

Practise diaphragmatic breathing for 5-10 minutes every day, or whenever you feel an increase in stress or tension. Soon your body will develop the habit, and relaxing will become second nature.

Visual imagery

Visual imagery is a relaxation technique that builds on deep breathing. It brings about relaxation by creating feelings of calmness and tranquillity. It can be practised anywhere, but is most easily done in a quiet, peaceful location. Make yourself comfortable. Begin with the deep breathing exercise described above, then try to visualise yourself in a peaceful scene – any place that you would like to be. This may be a warm beach, a green meadow or a mountain stream. Involve all of your senses: imagine how it looks, sounds (crashing ocean waves, birds singing), smells (tangy ocean scent, freshly-mown grass) and feels (sun on your skin, warm sand beneath your feet). Take a few deep breaths, in and out slowly, whilst thinking calming, relaxing thoughts. Tell yourself that you can return to this place whenever you want to.

Once you've imagined your own ideal scene, practise going back to it as often as possible, even if only for a few minutes at a time. This will help you establish the scene in your mind and make it easier to return to. After a while, you'll be able to visualise the scene whenever you want: to avoid a headache if you feel the beginning of one, to help yourself fall asleep once you have a headache, or to help pass the time more comfortably while medication takes effect.

What if I am pregnant or trying to become pregnant?

Pregnancy is a special time for women. Those with headache need to follow medical advice and healthy lifestyle habits even more carefully. The first few weeks of pregnancy are very important in the development of the baby. Some headache medications can harm the baby, and your doctor will tell you which you can and cannot use during pregnancy or while breast-feeding. Relaxation techniques are an excellent and safe alternative to managing headaches during pregnancy and whilst nursing.

Support Groups

Many countries have national or local associations for people with headache, usually run by volunteers who suffer from headache themselves. These organisations often provide useful advice, and they may be able to put you in touch with other people with headache living in your area. You may be able to find information about these groups on the internet or in your local library. Many are members of the World Headache Alliance (www.w-h-a.org).

Partnership and communication with your doctor

If you are consulting a doctor or nurse, you should work together as a team to manage your headaches. The most important thing that **you** can do is *communicate* with your doctor. He or she cannot help without understanding **your** headache problem. Good communication may start with keeping a headache diary, and showing it to your doctor. It does not need to be very detailed: your doctor can understand a lot just from seeing the pattern of headaches day by day over a month or two.

The next most important thing is to follow instructions. Your headache management plan may include medication for attacks or to prevent attacks. Unless used correctly, these can make things worse rather than better. Even the most expert doctors cannot know immediately what

will suit you best. You and your doctor may need to try several treatment options before you discover this. Work together to find the best treatment plan for **you**. Remember that over time things change, and your treatment plan may need to be updated.

Will my headache get better?

There is no known cure for any of the headache disorders; however, there are many things that **you** can do to improve your feelings of self-efficacy and quality of life. For most people, headache attacks become less frequent in later life. In the meantime, take note of the advice in this leaflet. Use a diary to note possible triggers. If you see a connection, try to avoid the trigger. Protect yourself by following a healthy lifestyle. Practise the relaxation techniques. And work with your doctor or nurse as a team, taking medications as instructed.

Following the advice in this leaflet can make the change from a condition that feels out of control to one that is under your control.

Where can I find more information about self-management of headache?

Make contact with your national association if one exists. If you don't know of one, the best source on the internet is the World Headache Alliance, which will lead you to all the others:

For further information: www.i-t-b.org