

# What **you** should **know** about.....

## HEADACHE SELF-MANAGEMENT

### Defining 'self-management'

- Self-management is what YOU can do to reduce the number and severity of your headaches.
- Self-management includes:
  - **Self-awareness** of the factors that **trigger** your headaches or make them worse, and self-awareness of factors that **reduce** the number of headaches, or help you manage headaches when they occur. Self-awareness lets you know how close you are to your headache threshold (the point at which a migraine will start) and the things you can do to avoid crossing your threshold.
  - **Self-monitoring** is the key to self-awareness. Self-monitoring involves keeping track of potential headache triggers. Everyone's triggers are different. It is often a combination or accumulation of triggers that pushes you to cross your headache threshold and get a migraine.
  - Some people find that if they can **react early** to a headache when they feel it coming (for example, by taking medication, going for a short walk, doing a relaxation exercise) they may prevent or reduce the severity of the headache.
  - Many people find that "**spacing**" themselves by planning and carrying out their activities in such a way so as to keep themselves below their headache "threshold" is very helpful in preventing headaches.
  - You may need to deliberately **change what you do** to avoid or lessen the things that 'self-monitoring' identified as possible headache triggers.
  - Living 'a **healthy lifestyle**' (avoid skipping meals, sleeping too little, and getting too stressed) may keep you below your headache threshold.

### Tips on self-monitoring

- The most effective way to do 'self-monitoring' is to use a recording form or '*headache diary*' to jot down the information that will help you see patterns in when, where and why you may be having headaches. You can make your own recording form or use a ready-made form or a 'smart device app'.
- In order to identify patterns; take a few moments when your headache begins to consider what may have triggered the headache. Common triggers include excessive stress, strong emotions, missed meals, poor sleep, fatigue, over-activity, under-activity, hormone changes, weather changes, certain foods and beverages, and strong odours. Some of your triggers may not be on the common triggers list.
- Sometimes it takes several triggers working together. For example, a glass of red wine or a weather change alone may not cause a headache but when they both happen on a single day, you get a headache.
- Record what you did to manage the headache including self-management strategies and medications.
- Review your diary and look for patterns of triggers and for what helped manage the headache.
- Go ahead and 'test' your ideas by doing something differently when you think you have found something that may be triggering your headaches (e.g. reduce your stress levels, get more sleep, or avoid a particular food) and see what happens. Your headaches may become less frequent. On future exposures to the trigger, you may be able to confirm that it was in fact a trigger for you.
- Keep up with self-monitoring for at least a month. Once you have a set of good headache management strategies in place, it may not be necessary to continue to keep headache diaries.

## Tips on healthy lifestyle

- Working towards a healthy lifestyle involves doing what you can to improve your overall health and emotional well-being including healthy eating, exercise, getting enough sleep and having support from family and friends.

## From self-monitoring to self-management

- Take what you've learned from your self-monitoring, make a list of your headache triggers, and learn how to pace your activities and manage stressors to stay below your headache threshold.
- Your goal is to develop a **Health Management Plan** by exploring what you can do
  - to reduce how often you have triggers,
  - improve your management of the headaches you still have, and
  - live a healthy lifestyle.

## Managing triggers

- Review your list of triggers and divide them into triggers you can do something about such as drinking red wine and triggers you can't control such as weather changes.
- For the triggers you can control, explore options for eliminating them if possible (red wine, processed meat, etc.).
- For triggers that cannot be eliminated or avoided, you can manage them (stress) or minimize them (missed meals and late nights, etc.).
- Some triggers are easy to change, but some may require more effort and learning new skills such as stress management.
- Once you've made the lifestyle changes to reduce and manage your triggers; use self-monitoring to see how effective you've been in reducing the frequency and severity of your headaches.

## Managing stress

- Excessive stress is often a headache trigger. Stress comes in many forms and can be anything that makes extra demands on your body or mind, especially if you feel threatened either socially or physically.
- Managing stress is similar to managing headache triggers. First, try to understand what is causing your stress and then make a plan for how you can reduce or eliminate the cause, if possible.
- Some examples of stress management strategies include regular exercise, a healthy diet, keeping a regular sleep schedule, asking others for support, and communicating effectively about your needs and limitations.

- Remember, you may not be able to prevent a stressful event from happening, but you can learn how to respond to stress in the best way possible. You may also need to learn new skills to manage the remaining stress.
- You can learn about stress management by taking a course either in your community or online, working with a psychologist or other trained health professional and reading good quality self-help books.
- As with other triggers, it's helpful to monitor your stress levels and see what happens to your headaches as your stress-management skills improve.

## Managing emotions

- Strong emotions are another common trigger for headaches.
- Managing emotions can be relatively easy or very complex. A good way to start is using your self-monitoring tools to identify the strong emotions and your ideas of what the cause or reason may be. Once you've identified what emotions you're experiencing and the likely 'causes', there are many options for learning how to manage your emotions including expressing your emotions with someone you trust, deep breathing to calm your emotions, working with a trained professional, taking a course and reading good quality self-help materials.
- It is often helpful to discuss what you've learned with your doctor and people in your life who are trustworthy, supportive and wise.

## Minimize the intensity and impact of a migraine

- Use your medications effectively (take the right medication in the right amount at the right time).
- Avoid activities that increase headache intensity (bright light, loud noises, physical activity).
- Avoid negative or 'catastrophic' thinking (such as "*this headache is killing me*", "*this is awful, I can't stand it*").
- Adopt more positive thinking ("*this is my usual headache and I know how to manage it*", "*my job is to take good care of myself and ride it out*").
- Keep calm and focus on breathing or calming thoughts.
- Let family, friends, co-workers etc. know what they can do to help out even if is merely to support you by leaving you to 'do your own thing' while you are having a headache.