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Migraine

Migraine is debilitating and not just another headache

I suffered headaches as a child and, not knowing any better, I assumed that was all they were. Over time the severity and frequency of them increased prompting numerous trips to the family GP. He eventually came to the conclusion that the cause was hypertension, and I never realised until later in life that particular condition was high blood pressure. I guess in a teenager this must have been regarded as unusual and pretty serious. After various medications including barbiturates were prescribed, none of which did any good, Dad made an appointment for me with a specialist in Harley Street, London. He thought it might be migraine, although he admitted that not much was known about it back then in the sixties. Even once the medical profession deigned to accept that it was different to an ordinary headache, many people continued to regard it as just an excuse to take time off work. That, unfortunately, was something I had to do once the pain reached a level when I could no longer function normally.

The symptoms are varied depending on the individual. Generally the pain affects one side of the head, and in the early stages a sufferer may not realise a migraine is on the way. One time my brother-in-law noticed before I did. "You've got a migraine," he said and added: "One side of your face is red." How true. I often found a warming of the skin on the cheek just below my left eye was the first nudge. Shortly after, the eyelid would begin to twitch and the side of my nose went numb. Next, the eyeball itself would start to ache. From there the pain worsened until it felt as if my head was in a tightening vice. Sight was impaired, sometimes blurred. Occasionally I saw flashing lights and experienced double vision. Some, I believe, become nauseous, although I have never been that way inclined, having a pretty strong constitution. But a cast-iron gut didn't stop the migraines. Take it from me, migraine isn't just a bad headache: it is extremely painful, debilitating, and very scary.

Causes in many respects can be a matter of guesswork on the part of the doctors. One suggested to me that the blood vessels in the brain may be swelling or constricting, and he put me on Propranolol, a beta blocker. It was supposed to be a preventative, and it was to a degree; but the migraines kept coming. Another theory was transference of neck pain which I also suffered. Physiotherapy was the answer, but that did no good either; in fact it only made it worse. Pain killers, it seemed, were the solution. The medical choice was Paracetamol, which might be fine for some; for me, however, they were no better than sugar pills unless paired with Codeine. I was on these for years and they helped, as long as I anticipated an on-coming migraine and started taking them early enough; but who wants to live a life on drugs? I eventually came to the conclusion that stress was the root of the problem and set about finding a remedy.

It meant a change of lifestyle, relocating from the city to a country area in a different State with a different climate. Work was also very simplified – no more balance sheets and covering for staff who often didn't turn up. Hard though farming was, the pace was slower and the environment far healthier than the smoke. I still had migraines, but they were less frequent and not as severe or debilitating; and I needed fewer painkillers.

Unfortunately, for most sufferers, drugs of some kind are necessary; however, there are ways to ease the pain in more natural ways. Considering the blood-vessel theory I tried massaging the scalp where the veins are close to the surface and can be trapped against the skull with the fingertips. Another spot to apply light pressure is the temple; and pressing the skin against the cheekbone below the eye also worked for me. Bear in mind, this only gave a short-lived, temporary relief; but when it feels like your head and eyes are about to explode, even a few seconds of relative peace is a blessing. Not only does it reduce the pain, but it lowers the level of stress and anxiety. The method applied over a period of time has a cumulative effect, bringing longer periods of relief; and this helps any drugs being taken to work more efficiently.

Once a migraine has begun, noise and strong lights should be avoided, and the body needs to relax. Lying down in a quiet, darkened room is best; and a cool, wet flannel placed on the forehead and covering the eyes provides extra relief. A cool towel on the back of the neck also helps. In both cases, however, I never used iced water or ice packs to cool the material – this just made the pain worse. With migraines, I came to the conclusion that gentle is the best of cures.

Wherever possible, migraine sufferers should try to avoid those triggers that bring it on in the first place. Eye strain should be minimised, particularly long computer sessions. Heavy concentration isn't good either. Then there's stress brought on by worrying about issues that have no direct consequences or are so far removed that they are beyond one's control. Constant arguments and bickering never help; neither will trying to jam too much into a short space of time. The signs of situations causing problems are fairly simple: frowning, tension, becoming short-tempered, losing concentration; all of these and more are indicative of situations that should be walked away from as quickly as possible. And asking others to understand this is not attention-seeking or a weakness: it is just about self-preservation.

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