Why You Should Keep a Migraine Journal

by SARAH RATHSACK

Tracking Your Migraines With a Migraine Journal

I have kept a migraine journal for years. I've done it paper and pencil, on forms from a doctor, and on apps, all to learn about my migraines and find patterns that can be avoided or altered.

I have found it is both helpful and frustrating at the same time. At the beginning, I learn a bit about myself and try to problem solve with some of the patterns I see. But I usually give up after a while, because it is defeating when I don't see improvement.

Regardless, I find it is something I go back to now and then to get focused on my migraines, and there is always something I can improve on.

So what do I journal?

Time

The time the migraine begins and ends should be noted to indicate the length of the migraine. A migraine can last for hours or days at a time. The time that it begins can give a good indication of what a trigger may be.

I think about what I ate around the time of the migraine starting. I also consider the time of day, how much water I have drank, my stress level and other triggers of mine that may have occurred at that time. The length of the migraine may also give me an indication of if or when medication helped.

I find that the time is difficult to track. I have a pretty constant migraine all the time; I am either having symptoms, have a migraine or am recovering from one. It is hard to tell what is an ongoing one or several migraines.

Location

The location where the migraine started can give a good indication on how to treat it more effectively.

Places to note may be behind or around the eye, temple, above eyebrows, back of the head/neck, or other locations. These places can be on both sides or on the left or right.

By locating where my migraines start I have been able to have a better discussion with my doctor on Botox placement.

Severity

Migraines are typically classified using a scale of 1 to 10 — one being the lowest and a 10 being a disabling attack. The scale is very personal.

I live at a five every day and to someone else my five may be a four or a six. The important thing about severity is being consistent in your own assessment of your pain.

When journaling, I find I do not have a constant number during the time frame. It fluctuates a lot and I often forget to journal the differences. I sometimes try to average my pain level or go back and try to record my spikes and relief.

Medication Taken

Noting the medication taken and the time it was taken is important. List all medications including over-the-counter drugs.

When I was younger, I did not realize I was getting rebound headaches from my over-the-counter medication and have since stopped taking any. Vitamins should also be listed and any changes in taking them.

The medication, severity and time will be an indicator of how quickly a medication works, if it works and what combination works.

Listing medications will also be a good reminder of what you have taken and the next time you may be able to use it again. When I have a migraine for days at a time, things become blurry and journaling my medication gives me confidence that I am taking things as directed.

It is also a good source to bring to your doctor who may be able to alter medication accordingly.

Identify Triggers

I have, what seems to be, an endless list of triggers. By identifying them, I am able to control what I can and be prepared for what I cannot.

A list of triggers may be, but not limited to: menstrual cycle, weather changes, food, meal times, water intake, activity, exercise, travel, sexual activity, sleep, stress, caffeine, alcohol, smoking or exposure to smoke, exposure to different smells, exposure to sun, and exposure to bright or flashing lights.

Some triggers I am able to predict, like my menstrual cycle. When I expect it, I am careful to limit other triggers like my diet, alcohol, exercise, caffeine, and exposure.

By knowing my triggers, I can limit what I can and be prepared for what I cannot.

In-depth food journaling may teach a lot about triggers. A lot of triggers are hidden in processed food — I know MSG is a big trigger for me and is labeled as several different names.

When I journal my food, I realize it is easier to be eating real foods I can identify. I need to eat constantly throughout the day and drink lots of water to avoid triggering a migraine.

Symptoms

Symptoms are feelings you get before a migraine. Symptoms may be nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, bothered by light/noises, blurred/double vision, sparking lights, eyelid puffy, eyelid droops, loss of vision, lightheaded, numbness/tingling, weakness in arms/legs, difficulty concentrating, speech difficulty, loss of consciousness, runny nose, and more.

This is another area I think is a personal assessment. A lot of these symptoms I also have during migraine postdrome.

Some people may suffer from other health issues that cross over so it is hard to assess. By knowing my body, I

try to journal from there.

Overall, journaling can be very beneficial. I feel that I learn something every time I do it.

When I do journal, I do it for a month, three months, or a year at a time. I find that doing it randomly doesn’t give me a good idea of patterns so I do it for a span of time consistently.

What have you learned from journaling?