Can You Still Exercise With Migraine?

by SARAH RATHSACK

Exercising and Migraine, Triggers and Motivation

To exercise or not, that is the question. Will it trigger a migraine or not is the next.

I'm often asked how I exercise with chronic migraine. How do I have the energy? What motivates me and what do I do to avoid triggering or worsening a migraine?

As always, we are all so different but I hope that by sharing my experiences you may learn or be motivated in a new way. The best advice I can give is to take it slow, listen to your body, find what works for you and don't be too hard on yourself.

If you can't do it one day, try another day. If something triggers you, try something else. A little bit is better than nothing, and nothing is OK if that's what you need.

It's important to find what makes you feel better mentally and physically in a way that works for you.

Finding What Works for You

My experience with exercising has drastically changed over the years as my migraines have changed.

As an adolescent I was an athlete and episodic sufferer. I spent many hours in bright, loud gyms, under the hot sun and expending unending energy for hours at a time.

At the time, I was episodic and had sports-induced migraines, but not to the point that I had to quit. I feel very lucky that I was able to participate and thrive in sports.

It taught me life lessons and set the tone for how I wanted my body to feel — energized, flexible and mentally invigorated. This is no longer possible!

As my migraines changed and I grew older, so did my ability to work out and how. I have, however, always tried to keep my body active to the best of my ability. I know that mentally and physically I feel better with some form of exercise in my regular routine.

How Do I Exercise?

Over the years I have learned to value the mental aspects of being active as much, if not more, than the physical aspects.

Some activities I am able to do as a chronic migraine sufferer are yoga, stretching and walks. All of them allow me to clear my mind, connect with my body and go at my own pace.

I no longer can do high-impact exercises. I cannot run or do interval training without getting flooded with migraine pain. Being outside is difficult on hot, sunny days, and sports are no longer an option for me. Slow and steady is now my race.

If the migraine pain doesn't keep me down, the lack of energy from fighting it tries. There are days that just walking to the kitchen seems like a task. My energy is zapped and the thought of a walk seems impossible.

On those days I rest. I try not to allow those days to outnumber my exercise days.

I find that mentally it is easier for me to stay on a consistent schedule. If movement is a part of my day, my mind wants to do it more. If I have a cycle of migraine that I can't move for days or weeks, it is difficult to get back into it.

A coach once told me that the mind gives up before the body. If I'm at a pain level below a seven, I tell my mind to exercise the best I can.

Why I Exercise

After I exercise I experience a variation of feelings. Some days I feel refreshed and so grateful to have done it. Some days I feel triggered and that I have made the wrong choice in exercise or duration. Other days are something different — I never know.

The bonus of exercise is battling medication weight gain, depression and sleep issues. I sleep better when I've exercised; I fall asleep easier and stay asleep longer, which allows me to be a bit more refreshed when I wake up. This sets me up for a better day than if I had not worked out.

My mental clarity is better and more positive while burning some calories. I always drink a lot of water and make sure to drink extra water to fight off my dehydration migraine trigger. I also tend to make better food choices before and after working out.

I also find that when I am physically active, I recover faster from a migraine and prevent them more often. I have found that exercise raises my endorphins enough to help my medications become more effective or break off the proverbial cobwebs from being in bed. I fight my pain more efficiently.

Motivation

I have workout buddies who motivate me. I walk my dog and she reminds me when it's time to go. I have small children who are active, and I enjoy hiking with them and spending time under a cool shaded canopy.

I have yoga friends who support me and take me to class if I'm unable to drive. Surrounding myself with exercise buddies is a good way to battle the days my mind is winning over my body.

And like I said, on days my body is in too much pain, I try again the next day. My buddies keep me accountable but do not give me guilt for not showing up. They praise me for my efforts and make me smile when I'm able to succeed in my goals.

My biggest motivation is my health. I know that exercise and eating well will only help me. I have a lot of triggers, but making my mind and body stronger will only help my migraine battle.

It's a battle to live with chronic migraine, and exercising is not an easy task. It seems to be another battle that I win and lose and try again, but one I fight because I know I'm better for it.