Managing Migraine Pain While Parenting

by BARBARA LEECH

Being a Mom With Migraines

I asked myself the other day, “Which came first, my kids or my migraine headaches?”

I had to do a little thinking back, since I had migraine pain long before I was actually diagnosed. But once I accessed that part of my memory banks, it was very clear that my kids were present long before my migraines, and I have to wonder if either hormones or a raised level of stress and chaos played a role in the appearance of this chronic condition.

I have read that migraines can be triggered by fluctuating hormone levels and often occur in women just before their monthly menstruation occurs. These are referred specifically to as menstrual migraines. I have occasionally noticed a similar pattern in my own life, but after my second child was born it felt like I was in a constant cycle of either having a migraine or recovering from one. And she was an awesome baby who slept through the night and rarely put up a fuss, so it was not the noise level that prompted the numerous attacks.

But I have to wonder if the stress that is “motherhood” on some days triggered just the right chemical reaction in my body to set the stage for a lifetime of migraines. I feel that once the body establishes a reaction-type pattern, it tends to stick to it for a while – at least until the cycle can be broken.

I think life, motherhood, stress over money and work and PTO fundraisers combined with that intense perfume on my neighbor at the bus stop created the perfect conditions for a migraine to form. So it did… for about the next 16 years.

Then, a miraculous thing happened. I woke up one day and did not have a migraine coming on. I was divorced and finally living a somewhat peaceful existence. I had survived a lot and grown stronger as a person through it all, so stress had a tougher time reaching me like once did. I had a few years with very few headaches and it was bliss.

Then, a few years later, I remarried and had my third child. Pregnancy at 37 was a shock to my body and my mind and I suddenly found myself with that familiar old feeling of a nerve being pinched throughout one side of my head and my eyes ready to explode from normal daylight. My migraines had returned.

Coincidence? Honestly, who knows? But I am rather afraid that I have another 15 years of migraines ahead of me. There was no lull in my migraines as I had my fourth, and final child, and now they remain something I must endure at least twice each month.

The Hormone and Headache Link

According to researchers, migraines seem to be connected to changes in the levels of the estrogen hormone in some women – which drops right before menstruation each month. Basically, premenstrual migraines happen

during or after the time when the female hormones, estrogen and progesterone, drop to their lowest levels.

We all know that pregnancy can cause shifts in your body chemistry for months following birth. Birth control pills can also perpetuate the fluctuations and promote migraine attacks.

It is also theorized that migraines may involve changes in nerve pathways, neurochemicals, and blood flow in the brain itself. Basically, the body's chemical balance is off, which causes blood vessels to swell and stimulate the pain response. Researchers have also noted that the neurotransmitter serotonin may also play a key role in migraines.

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So What Is a Mother to Do?

As a mother and migraine sufferer I know I am not alone. I will never obtain a level of quiet in my house that makes my migraines tolerable. And I don't have the leisure of calling in sick for mom duties, or work for that matter. I've had to devise methods for calming the pain enough so I can carry on.

I would like to sound very tough and say my strategies always work, but that is simply not true. But here are few mommy survival tips for the migraine sufferer:

Know your migraines and be prepared

If you know certain foods or skipping meals act as triggers, avoid those items and don't skip a meal, no matter what your schedule. Pack healthy snacks if you are too busy to grab lunch and say no to artificial sweeteners, wine and chocolate, all known to be linked to migraines.

Have your migraine medication on you at all times, because if you find a headache coming on it can make a huge difference to curb its intensity with fast, early treatment.

Keep a log to better know what is behind your last migraine

This may mean having a notebook handy to record how much sleep you are getting, what you are eating, days you are not drinking enough water and your menstrual cycle. Once you see a pattern emerge you will be better prepared to cut it off at the pass by getting more sleep, drinking more water, etc.

Find ways to still be mom

Just because you have a migraine does not mean you can't find quiet, dimly lit activities you can do with your kids. Play with play doh, lay on the floor and build with Legos or turn off all the lights, put on a movie and pretend you are in a movie theater.

Avoid bright sunlight or loud places, but look for ways to still enjoy time together.

Explain your migraine in a way your kids will understand

I have explained to my kids what a migraine feels like so that they will better understand what is happening when I have one and won't be worried or afraid. Children tend to get very concerned when mom is "sick" so if you are laying around, clearly in pain, it can cause your little one concern.

Try explaining it in simple and age-appropriate terms. It helps to talk about it on a pain scale of 1 to 10, like you are asked at the doctor's office. That way when you say, "Mommy has a level 5 migraine today," your kids will have some idea of just how intense it is and not always assume you are at your worst. It can also help them curb excess noise appropriately to your migraine level of pain.

Cut yourself some slack

It is so easy to feel guilty for the time or activities lost because of your migraines. Let’s face it, you are not yourself when you are suffering with one. But you need to be kind to yourself and realize you can only do so much when a migraine hits hard.

If you don't feel like your current medication or other migraine treatments are helping with the pain, don't give up on exploring other options. Look for ways to help with relaxation and talk to your doctor about other medications that may help.

Being a parent can be a mixed bag of joy, pride, love and exhaustion, but when you add migraines to the mix you may often find it difficult to keep up with everything expected of you.

Know your triggers and try and avoid them, but when a migraine does occur, realize that parenthood is the perfect climate for a migraine storm to occur. Be strong and shelter yourself from any guilt – you have no choice but to lay down and weather that storm until it passes.