

# What **You** Should Know About Headache Self-Management

## What is self-management?

- **'Self-management'** is what YOU can do to reduce the number and severity of your headaches.
- **Everyone is different**, so the most effective way to figure out how to manage your headaches is to use a 'headache diary' (see below), and use what you learn to:
  - avoid or reduce your 'headache triggers' (see below),
  - improve your management of the headaches you still have, and
  - work towards a healthy lifestyle.
- When first learning how to self-manage your headaches, work with your healthcare provider to determine what type of headache you may have, as knowing your headache type may help you manage your headaches better.

## What are headache triggers, and what is a headache diary?

- **'Headache triggers'** are what we call the things that cause your headaches or make them worse. 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. Note that some of your triggers may not be in this list.
- By jotting down information in one place (a ['headache diary'](#)) whenever you have a headache, you may see patterns in when, where, and why you may be having headaches, and be able to identify your personal headache triggers. Keeping your headache diary for at least a month will help you see these patterns.
- When you think you have identified your headache triggers, you can test your ideas by doing things differently (e.g., get more sleep or avoid a particular food) and seeing what happens. The next time the expected trigger happens, you may be able to confirm that it was in fact a headache trigger for you.
- If you also write down what you did and what medications you took to manage a headache, you may also see patterns in what could help you next time.

## What does headache self-management include? – The 4 Basics of Self-Management

- **Manage triggers** – By using your headache diary, you can pinpoint which triggers you can control (e.g., drinking red wine), and which you can't (e.g., weather changes). And by writing down any lifestyle changes you've made to manage your triggers, you'll see what has been successful.
- **Manage stress** – Stress comes in many forms, and can be anything that makes extra demands on your body or mind. Try to identify what is causing your stress, and then avoid or reduce the cause, if possible, or learn how to best respond to stress. Some examples of stress management include regular exercise, a healthy diet, keeping a regular sleep schedule, and asking others for support. You can also learn about stress management skills such as relaxation training, biofeedback, and cognitive behavioural therapy by taking a course, working with a psychologist or other trained health professional, and reading good-quality self-help materials. By writing down how you've dealt with your stress, you'll see what has been successful.
- **Manage emotions** – Try to identify what is causing any strong emotions, and learn how to best deal with those emotions. This may include expressing your emotions with someone you trust, deep breathing, working with a trained professional, and reading good-quality self-help materials. By writing down how you've dealt with your strong emotions, you'll see what has been successful.
- **Minimize intensity and impact** – To minimize your headaches, you can try to: react early (e.g., take medication, go for a short walk, do a relaxation exercise); use the right medication in the right amount at the right time; avoid activities that increase headache intensity (e.g., bright light, loud noises); avoid negative thinking (e.g., "*this is awful, I can't stand it*"); adopt more positive thinking (e.g., "*this is my usual headache and I know how to manage it*"); focus on breathing or calming thoughts; and let family, friends, and co-workers know what they can do to help out, even if it is leaving you to do your own thing while you are having a headache. By writing down what you've done to minimize your headaches, you'll know what you can do next time.

For more information, see the full brochure at [www.ihe.ca/research-programs/hta/aagap/headache](http://www.ihe.ca/research-programs/hta/aagap/headache).