



Headache Diaries

Health care providers often ask patients to keep a headache diary. Why do we do this? How should it be kept? How much detail should be included?

A headache diary is a recording of headaches that typically is done in a calendar form. The patient makes note of any days that he or she experiences a headache. This notation can be as simple as an “X” on any day with a headache. Some patients may prefer to have different symbols to distinguish between a migraine and what they may consider a more severe headache compared to their milder headaches. In any event, it is important to note all headache days and not just record the “bad ones”. For women, it is also important to note the days of menses to see if there is a menstrual trigger to their headaches. This could be simply noted as an “M” or a red dot on the days of menses.

Some patients ask if they need to record everything they eat; the exact times they get up and go to sleep; and other details of their daily life. From my experience, too much detail can complicate the simple recording of headaches and becomes too cumbersome for the average patient to record. Another way to note details that may be important in identifying headache triggers is to note the possible or suspected trigger for a particular headache by symbols for different triggers. Examples of triggers could be red wine; a food additive such as MSG; lack of sleep; stress; and weather change. Examples of how to correlate headaches with triggers can be found on the headache websites given in this newsletter.

Finally, why do we ask patients to keep a headache diary? In my opinion, it is the single best way to evaluate a patient’s headache pattern and to make appropriate treatment decisions. For example, if a patient is having a headache >15 days/month, then making sure they are not in medication overuse or drug rebound from taking too much medication is the next step. The number of headache days/month can help us decide whether a daily preventive medication is necessary. Over time we can monitor whether a particular treatment approach is working by comparing a current headache calendar with a prior one. Looking at the pattern of the headache days as well as the total number is important. A woman may have a 3-5 day headache the week of her menses but then 0-2 headaches for the remainder of the month. This pattern would point to menstrual migraine with targeted treatment during her vulnerable time of the month being an appropriate treatment approach.

Where can you go for more information and to print out a headache calendar?

Two of my recommended websites for headache calendars are:

1. www.achenet.org
2. www.headaches.org

Make sure to always bring your completed headache calendar in with you to all follow-up appointments. It will help you and your provider to accurately assess how you are doing.

Sincerely,

Susan Hutchinson, M.D.