

Una O'Connor

Self Management of Migraine

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My name is Una O'Connor and I'm a third level student in Tralee IT. My migraine began when I was 13 years old. At first they weren't too bad – they were few and far between. By the time I reached my junior cert year - which was a very stressful year - they were worse and a lot more frequent. I was advised to go to my local GP. After eliminating other problems including problems with my eyes and teeth, I was diagnosed with migraine. My GP encouraged me to keep a diary and I found a pattern to my attacks as a result - late nights, too much study, irregular sleep, and diet were all things that seemed to trigger attacks. My GP also started me on a medication called Sibelium, which worked well for a while. After my junior cert, I decided to do the transition year, which I thought would be relatively stress free. So I decided to stop my medication but was very disappointed to discover that my migraines continued. I wasn't in school much that year and I was able to try alternative treatments, including acupuncture, allergy testing, specialised dieting, relaxation therapy and massage. None of these helped. If I had a migraine and I went to my therapist, she would actually reduce the length of the attack, but it did not prevent attacks. Despite all my efforts I was still suffering a lot and missing a lot of school. The only thing that benefited me was Cranio Sacral therapy.

Fifth and Sixth years are obviously the most difficult years for a student. I tried different preventive medications for migraine but none of these worked for me. During the 2 leaving cert years, I suffered 4 hemiplegic migraine attacks and I was in hospital for 3 of these. During these attacks, I lost the power and sensation of the right side of my body, including my hands and leg. I was unable to walk or write for up to 4 days with the attacks. I missed 6 weeks from school with each attack and I had fallen a long way behind. At this stage I joined the Migraine Association and attended various seminars. Little did I realise that I would be speaking at them as well! The seminars were a great help to me in understanding my condition and in realising that there were other sufferers out there.

At this time I also began attending Dr. Orla Hardiman's clinic in Beaumont Hospital. The opening of the Cork clinic was great for me as I knew Dr. O'Sullivan from the Associations meetings and I felt he fully understood my condition., His support and advice helped me

through the most stressful year of my life – the leaving cert. Dr. O'Sullivan and my own GP started me on a combination of medicines – Amitriptyline and Sanomigran which are very powerful and effective medicines. Straight away, my headaches became less frequent and lasted only 24-36 hours instead of the usual 6-10 days. I've been on this medication for 3 years and in the past year I have been able to reduce the dosage a bit. My last serious attack was August last year, 13 months ago. I remember it very well as I was coming to Dublin for the All-Ireland semi final between Cork and Kerry. After that game, I think half of Cork must have had a migraine anyway!!

I've had a very difficult time with migraine but I've gone from a migraine a week to a migraine a year. I've gone from 10-day attacks to 24-hour attacks. This has been made possible by a number of reasons:

1. My local GP was brilliant throughout the worst periods. He was very understanding and very patient. He always took time to read my diary and was always willing to listen. He also encouraged me to join the Migraine Association. Until then, I had not heard about the Association.
2. Keep a good accurate diary. I know that is very hard to do, because every night you have to sit down and write a record of your day, but it is worth it in the end if you can identify some trigger factor. Not only will it help you, but it will also help your doctors put you on the right medications. In my case, the diary helped me identify a number of triggers. It also helped me to notice that it wasn't just 1 trigger factor in isolation that brought on an attack, but a combination of them e.g. if I studied all day Saturday, then went out and got home late, then skipped breakfast on Sunday for a lie in, I was 100% guaranteed to have a migraine by Sunday night. To avoid all this, I made sure to get enough sleep the night before, eat before going out and tried not to sleep in on Sunday. Regular routine is very important.
3. Keep food with you at all times, especially if you know you are going to be away from home for a long time. A few biscuits or a piece of fruit is ideal.
4. In terms of study or work, take plenty of breaks, even if only for 5 minutes. Go for a walk, watch TV, read the paper – that kind of thing. Make sure your desk is at the right height for you. Limit bending and ensure that there's no eyestrain. In my case, this would cause a migraine.

5. Join the Migraine Association. This has made a huge difference in my life. No-one in my family ever had migraine and so no-one knew anything about it. The Migraine association provided me with an understanding of the condition and provided me with the knowledge and information I needed to overcome it. The Assoc also gives you a great opportunity to discuss you own experiences with others and share ideas while you are at it. The Migraine Nurse is also just a phone call away.
6. Go to the Migraine Clinic – meeting experts who know and understand migraine and who have an interest in it is a great advantage. Having someone like this is half the battle in managing migraine. I was furious on one occasion when I was taken to hospital with a hemiplegic attack and the doctor on call told me it was ‘only migraine’. When people cant see that there’s something wrong with you, they tend to believe that you are faking it just to get out of an exam or some work or whatever.
7. If you are in school, discuss the fact that you have migraine with your teachers and your principal. By informing them and giving them the correct information that they need, they will be more sympathetic to your situation and will understand how serious your situation is. Personally, during my leaving cert exams, my teachers, doctors and parents organised special facilities for me. If I got an attack, I had a tape recorder on site just in case I wouldn’t be able to finish writing my paper. If I needed to leave the room, there was an extra supervisor on call to accompany me. This was a great reassurance for me and helped me to keep my mind on the work, without worrying about other things. Thankfully, everything went well and I passed the exams. When I went to college, I did the same thing – I approached my lecturers and the head of the Department and let them know the situation. They also put facilities in place for me.

So here I am today enjoying a normal healthy lifestyle and doing all the things that people my own age would normally do. I recently took up kickboxing and thank God I am also able to go out and enjoy myself once or twice a week as well. I am living proof that migraine can be managed and that you can get on with your life. The best advice I can give a young person here is to PLAN everything. Don’t let things go until the last minute in case you get an attack. Be organised. If you have a project to hand in, do it early. I hope my story has given you some ideas as to how you can manage migraine.

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