

Patient information factsheet

The mind-body link: Looking at different ways to manage migraines and chronic headaches

In modern healthcare there is an increasing focus on looking at how our minds and bodies work together, and how mental and physical wellbeing are related – the ‘mind-body link’.

This factsheet aims to give you some useful information about the mind-body link in relation to migraines and chronic headaches, and looks at some different ways to manage your physical symptoms and emotional wellbeing.

It's very important to make clear that in no way is it being suggested that your symptoms are imagined or not real. That your symptoms are real is not in any doubt. It is crucial to point this out, as we know that some people may have, on occasion, felt that their symptoms have been dismissed by other people, including healthcare professionals as ‘all in their head’.

Some of the ideas covered here may be new to you and might seem a little unusual. There's quite a lot to cover, so you may wish to read a section at a time.

If you have any further questions, please speak to your healthcare professional.

What is the mind-body link?

Before looking at some of the methods which may be useful in managing migraines and chronic headaches, it may be helpful to have an understanding of the following ideas about how the mind and body work together.

Your mind and body are closely linked. This means that your thoughts and feelings can positively or negatively affect your physical health and what you do with your body (eat, exercise and sleep) can affect your mental state. For some physical complaints (aches or pains), the diagnosis and treatment is clear. However, some health conditions (including migraines and chronic headaches) can be more complex, and symptoms may be affected by other factors, such as lifestyle, stress and emotional wellbeing.

Pain

Pain is the body's alarm system. It tells us when there is something wrong. When your body is hurt, the nerve cells at the site of the injury send a signal up your spinal cord to your brain and you feel the sensation of pain. As the signal is processed, you start to develop thoughts and emotions.

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If the alarm signal is sent repeatedly, your brain may produce the feeling of pain. This is your body's way of getting your attention and alerting you to the possibility of danger. For some people, this alarm system may be extra sensitive after an injury or stressful event. This means that it will take fewer alarm signals to result in the feeling of pain.

Coping strategies, as outlined in this factsheet, can help to calm and retrain the alarm system.

Gate control theory of pain

Your pain levels may change throughout the day. One theory to explain why this happens is called the gate control theory of pain.

It uses the idea of a series of gates located in the spine that can be opened to allow pain messages from the pain site through, or closed to stop pain messages being sent to the brain.

If the gates are more open, then more pain messages pass through to the brain and you are likely to experience a higher level of pain. If the gates are more closed, then fewer messages get through and you are likely to experience less pain.

These gates are controlled by how you feel, think and act.

Factors that can open the pain gates and increase pain:

- stress and tension (from worry, anxiety, anger and depression)
- poor sleep
- feeling down or thinking negatively
- focusing all your attention on the pain
- isolation or withdrawing from people
- avoiding doing things

Factors that can close the pain gates and reduce pain:

- distraction (concentrating on something other than the pain)
- having fun and doing things that you enjoy
- feeling happy and relaxed
- exercising and stretching
- learning to manage your emotions effectively
- thinking helpful, balanced thoughts
- spending time with people you care about
- participating or contributing in your community

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

Headache and migraine symptoms can be triggered by physical and emotional stress.

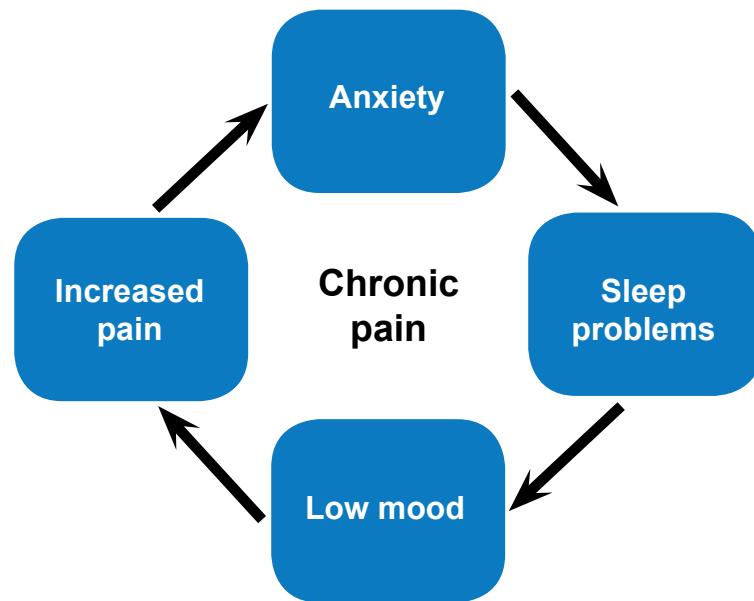
Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a psychological approach that is used to manage stress. CBT is based on the idea that how we feel, think and act are all connected. CBT can be used to help change your thought processes and actions through relaxation exercises and mindfulness, which in turn can change how you feel and improve your physical health.

Different thinking styles

How you think can have a big impact on how you deal with pain. Sometimes you can get stuck in a vicious cycle and it is hard to find a way out.

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Example of how pain can become a vicious cycle:



Unhelpful thinking styles can include:

- jumping to conclusions or blowing things out of proportion
- labelling yourself and others
- blaming yourself and taking responsibility for something that wasn't your fault
- ignoring positives that have happened
- noticing failures and not successes
- using critical words such as 'should' or 'must'

Negative thoughts tend to be:

- automatic (they just happen)
- distorted (don't really fit the facts)
- continuous (can't be easily turned off)

Negative thoughts often seem true so we tend to listen to them. The more we hear them, the more we believe them. Thinking negatively can affect your way of dealing with everyday situations, like being in pain. Positive self-talk (your inner voice) can encourage you to break out of these habits and become your own personal coach.

Positive coping thoughts

- This feels bad, but it will pass.
- I have survived before, I will survive now.
- I can use my coping skills to get through this.
- Stop and breathe. I can do this.
- It's ok to feel this way, it's a normal reaction.

Challenge negative thoughts

It may help to try to challenge negative thoughts. You can do this by weighing up the evidence for and against them, and considering the pros and cons of acting in a certain way. Then you'll be able to come up with a more balanced, realistic thought. Talking to someone else about your thoughts or imagining what you would suggest to a friend can sometimes help.

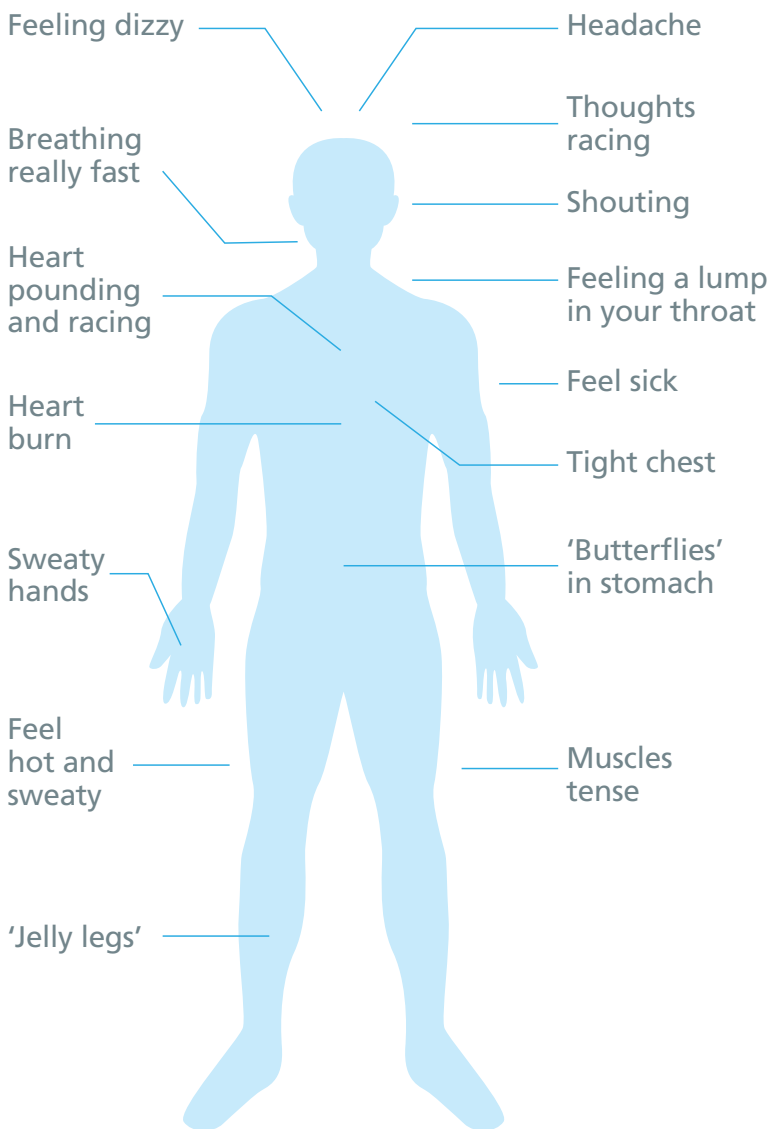
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Ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I getting things out of proportion?
- Am I thinking negatively about the future?
- What's the worst that can happen?
- How likely is it that what I am worrying about will actually happen?
- How important is this really?
- Am I putting pressure on myself?

Stress and relaxation

The fight or flight response is an automatic survival mechanism that prepares people to either run away or fight when faced with danger. When under stress, the body reacts in the same way to danger and produces a chemical called adrenaline. Adrenaline helps your body react more quickly. It makes the heart beat faster, increases blood flow to the brain and muscles, and stimulates the body to make sugar to use for fuel. These sensations cause your muscles to tense and you may feel uncomfortable.



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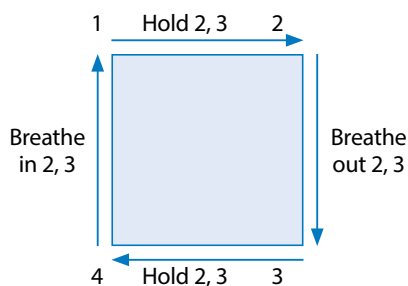
Approaches which can help calm the flight or fight response

Relaxation and mindfulness (paying more attention to the present moment – to your own thoughts and feelings, and to the world around you) can help to ease this tension and calm the body and the mind down. Some techniques which may help are explained below.

Relaxed breathing

Make sure that you are in a quiet location, free from distractions and in a comfortable position. As hard as it sounds, try to let go of any worries or distracting thoughts. Close your eyes. Try to breathe through your nose rather than your mouth.

Deliberately slow your breathing down. Inhale (breathe in) slowly then exhale (breathe out) slowly. Count to four as you inhale, hold your breath for four and then count to four as you exhale. Make sure that your breaths are smooth, steady and continuous (not jerky).



Pay attention to how your body naturally relaxes. Relaxed breathing should be low down in your abdomen (tummy), not high in your chest. Put one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest and try to make the hand on your stomach rise as you breathe in.

Try breathing in a relaxed way for at least a few minutes at a time. Aim for five to ten minutes if you can. Try to practice on a regular basis, for example three times a day.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Mentally scan your body. Notice your headache (if you have one) and other areas that feel tense. Try to loosen up these areas. Rotate your head in a smooth, circular motion and roll your shoulders forward and backward several times. Let all of your muscles completely relax. Work through each of your muscles using the recommended sequence below. Squeeze each area and hold for five seconds then release. Repeat the sequence three times.

Recommended sequence:

1. Right hand and arm (clench your fist and tighten the muscles in your arm)
2. Left hand and arm (clench your fist and tighten the muscles in your arm)
3. Right leg (tense your leg, lifting your knee slightly)
4. Left leg (tense your leg, lifting your knee slightly)
5. Stomach and chest
6. Back muscles (pull your shoulders back slightly)
7. Neck and throat (push your head back slightly into the pillow or surface)
8. Face (scrunch up the muscles in your face)

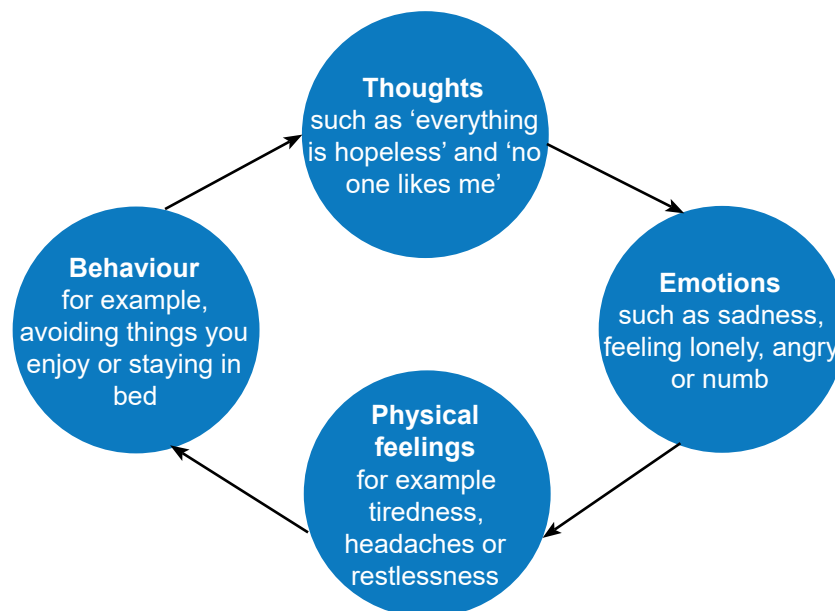
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Activity and mindfulness

When we are in pain, it can begin to affect our mood. People who are in long-term pain may eventually:

- think negatively about themselves, the future and the world around them
- dwell on negative thoughts, mull things over, ask themselves why or think regretful things about the past (what they should or shouldn't have done)
- feel tired, find it difficult to concentrate, sleep less or more, eat less or more, or lose interest in hobbies, activities or sex
- stop doing the things they used to enjoy
- stop going to work or doing things around the house
- isolate themselves from family or friends

This can become a vicious cycle. You can improve your mood by looking at the factors that cause the low mood and try to make some positive changes. For example, rather than do less, try to be more active, as this will make you feel better.



Activity and physical exercise

Increasing your activity and exercise levels can:

- make you feel better about yourself
- make you feel less tired and more motivated
- improve your ability to think clearly
- take your mind off any unhelpful thoughts
- give you a sense of achievement and enjoyment
- encourage you to be with other people
- stimulate your body to produce natural anti-depressants
- make you more healthy in general
- stimulate your appetite

Relax while doing an activity

Activities can help distract you and take your mind off things. Try joining in an activity that you usually enjoy, such as:

- reading
- drawing
- writing

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- cooking
- listening to music
- taking a bath
- meeting friends
- gardening
- exercise or sports
- going to the cinema or theatre
- going out for dinner or going shopping
- going for a walk
- playing a game or doing a puzzle

Grounding

This method can help if you are feeling really distressed, panicky or need to calm down quickly. It is called grounding because it aims to help you ground yourself into the here and now. To do this:

- look at your surroundings and describe them to yourself.
- use the 5-4-3-2-1 technique. Think about five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can touch (and touch them), two things you can smell or like the smell of, and one slow, deep breath.
- try to think about different things or play mental games. For example, count backwards in sevens from 100, think of ten different animals or ten blue things, think of an animal or country for each letter of the alphabet, say the alphabet slowly or say the alphabet backwards.
- make an emergency or soothe box that you can use another time. Fill it with meaningful and helpful objects or reminders.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a form of self-awareness training. It is about being aware of what is happening in the present. Being 'present' can help you to stop focusing on things that have happened in the past or worrying about what may happen in the future. Mindfulness involves sitting silently and paying attention to your thoughts and your body, the sounds around you and the sensation of breathing. It will help bring your attention back whenever your mind starts to wander. It can also help people to cope with various emotional states, such as depression and anxiety, and physical pain.

The importance of sleep

Sleep is very important. The amount of sleep you get has a direct effect on your mood and stress levels. Small changes to your sleeping habits can have a big effect on your wellbeing.

Take care of yourself

- Do not drink caffeinated drinks after 4pm
- Do not eat a big meal before bed
- Avoid drinking alcohol
- Increase your daily physical activity (this helps your body to feel tired)

Have a regular bedtime routine

- Try to go to bed around the same time each night, as this teaches your body when it's time to go to sleep
- Try to get seven to nine hours of sleep each night
- Try to wake up at the same time every day, even if this is tiring at first
- Have a soothing drink like chamomile tea or a milky drink

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- Have a warm bath or a routine of washing and brushing your teeth
- Practice your relaxation techniques or mindfulness
- When in bed, try to reflect on the positive things that happened that day
- Try not to watch TV or use electronic devices before bed
- Sleep only at night time

Make your bedroom a pleasant place

- Keep it clean and tidy
- Make sure your bedding and pillows are comfortable
- Avoid harsh lighting
- Use pleasant smells, such as lavender oils or scented candles of your choice

Useful links and apps

Websites

- www.migrainetrust.org
- www.nhs.uk/conditions/migraine
- www.nationalmigrainecentre.org.uk
- www.psychologytools.com
- www.getselfhelp.co.uk
- www.nhs.uk/conditions/cognitive-behavioural-therapy-cbt/how-it-works
- www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started

Apps for mindfulness

- Calm
- Headspace
- Mindfulness Daily
- 3 Minute Mindfulness

Apps for tracking migraine triggers and symptoms

These apps allow you to create a diary of your diet and daily lifestyle to see if you can identify any common triggers of your migraines that could be avoided in the future.

- Migraine Buddy
- iHeadache
- Migraine Insight
- Happify (for stress and worry)

What to do if you need more help

Depression and anxiety are common and can happen to anyone (one in four of us over our lifetime). Certain factors make you more likely to experience depression and anxiety. These include your biological makeup, your upbringing and your reaction to life events. We hope the advice given in this factsheet helps, but you should contact your GP if:

- you have been feeling depressed for more than a few weeks
- anxiety is affecting your daily life
- you've had thoughts of self-harming or are feeling suicidal

You may be able to access free talking therapy (CBT) from your local IAPT service.

If you live in Southampton or Dorset, you can contact Steps 2 Wellbeing.

Steps 2 Wellbeing

Website: www.steps2wellbeing.co.uk

Telephone: **0800 612 7000**

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If you live in Hampshire, you can contact italk.

italk

Website: www.italk.org.uk

Telephone: **023 8038 3920**

For a list of organisations you can call for immediate help, please visit the NHS mental health helpline page.

NHS mental health helpline

Website: www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines

The Samaritans helpline is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, for people who want to talk in confidence.

Samaritans

Telephone: **116 123 (free)**

For a translation of this document, or a version in another format such as easy read, large print, Braille or audio, please telephone **023 8120 4688**.

For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalneeds