

# PATIENT-TO-PATIENT

## TRICKS-OF-THE-TRADE

### RECOVERY

You just had an ETV or Shunt Implantation surgery, as with any major surgery, it will take from 4-6 weeks for you to feel like yourself. Your strength will come back slowly and during the first few weeks, or so, you will get tired easily and find yourself napping more than usual. Don't worry this is normal for everyone who has had major surgery.

As your strength starts coming back it's time to get out of the chair and start doing things. One easy way to increase your activity level is to start taking short walks (down the block and back). You can increase the length of your walks as you get stronger. It is more fun and helps stimulate your mind, when you have someone to talk to on those walks, so try and get a family member or friend to join you (it might even do them some good!). Of course, you should follow your doctor's and/or physical therapist instructions, if you do what they recommend you'll get back to normal sooner.

To exercise your memory during your recovery, try playing board games (remember how much fun they were when you were a kid). **You will be surprised** at how much a good game of Monopoly can help your short-term memory. If you are a card player, you can even try (a game of) Solitaire, Bridge, Pinochle, or even Poker. Many people with hydrocephalus suffer from short-term memory problems, these games will pose a challenge, but if you can overcome this roadblock, it will be worth the effort! Patience is the key.

### HEADACHES

Approximately 93% of the general population suffers from an occasional headache. If you have a shunt (even if you have never had a headache before) you "might" now be prone with having headaches. While some of your headaches may indicate trouble, most are just part of having a shunt.

No one knows for sure why individuals, with shunts, suffer from re-occurring headaches at a higher rate than the general population. It *may be* that these individuals, with a shunt, become sensitive to very small pressure changes caused by the shunt's valve opening and closing (more research needs to be done in this area to know for sure). It's truly a dilemma.

If you have re-occurring headaches, we recommend that you keep a diary of your headaches. Recording things like date, time of day the headache started, the weather condition, whether you were lying down, standing, sitting, the severity and location of your headache. If you notice a pattern with headaches (they occur at the same time of day every day or, only when you're doing a specific activity, etc.), let your doctor know immediately, it could be that the opening pressure of your shunt valve needs to be adjusted. A diary will help you explain to your neurologist or neurosurgeon about your headaches. A detailed diary can also help him/her to determine a course of treatment. Unfortunately, for many shunted individuals, there may be no dependable treatment for most of our headaches.

## **HELP WITHOUT MEDICATION**

### ***Headache Relief***

If you experience the occasional (severe) headache that won't respond to medication, you might try applying heat to the area. By sitting in semi-reclining position (such as a reclining chair or laying on the bed or sofa with a couple of pillows under your back and head) in quiet, dark room and apply heat (heating pad, hot water bottle, or hot wash cloth) to the area that hurts the worse. The heat will relax the capillaries in the scalp, which should give you some relief.

If it is extremely hot (outside) and/or heat doesn't seem to help your headache, try using an ice pack, cold washcloth, or a dampened cloth with ice cubes wrapped in it. Again, find a quiet place to relax in a semi-reclining position, apply the cold item as you would with heat. The cold will shrink the tissue around the capillaries which, again, should provide some relief.

### ***Night Headaches***

If you wake-up most nights or most mornings with a headache, it may be that your shunt isn't set correctly (which may mean that an adjustment/re-programming, by your doctor, is needed), or it may be that you're simply sleeping on the *wrong* pillow. Some individuals have found relief by switching to a **firm** pillow which tends to provide better support to their neck and head. These same individuals also keep a little travel pillow (similar to the kind airlines use) close by the bed. If, they wake-up in the middle of the night with headache, they use the travel pillow to further elevate their head.

### ***Bend me, Shake Me***

Shunts, as good as they are, do not mimic the natural body process 100%. For this reason, you may find that activities, which you use to do with no problem, now cause a headache. These activities include, but are not limited to, bending over to tie your shoes, bending to get something on low shelf, or even bending to get the golf ball out of cup after you sunk the birdie putt. You will need to re-train yourself to do

everyday tasks a little differently. A good example is tying your shoes, unless, you want to buy all new slip-on shoes. Slide your feet into the shoes, sit down, then bring your foot up to the opposite knee, tie your shoe. (Also, this is better for your back.) Also, learn to squat, not bend, when getting things from low places and floors. Learn to squat to get the golf out of cup or buy a suction cup for your putter.

### **Highs and Lows**

Recently, published research confirms changes in barometer pressure that accompanies an approaching weather front can affect individuals who suffer from headaches. The specific study addressed migraine sufferers, but “if” the barometer pressure change affects migraine sufferers, there is no reason to believe that individuals with a shunt are not affected also! Through our own (*NHF*) research, we have been able to determine that a majority of shunted individuals will be affected, at least occasionally, from an approaching weather front. The symptoms can range from just not feeling right, not being able concentrate, and having no energy. But, sometimes these symptoms can turn into a full blown headache that makes you just want to find a bed or comfortable place and close your eyes until it passes. Unfortunately, if it the headache reaches that point – all you really can do is find a dark, quiet, comfortable place and wait out the storm. Once the front is overhead, you will start to feel better, almost immediately.

It is important to remember, that a large percentage of the general population suffer from headaches once in a while. Just as with the general population; not all of your headaches are related to your hydrocephalus, your shunt, or ETV!

Of course, if your headache is severe, lasts for days and, is accompanied by the same or similar symptoms to those you exhibited before you were shunted, get to your doctor or an emergency room!!

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