Get Over It

Free advice and a shot of attitude for head-and-nose aches

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Dear Nurse Know-It-All:
I know you're going to slap me twice and shriek, "You whiny AIDS victim!" but, hey, life after Lazarus is no picnic, and now I'm getting these killer headaches. Will the antiretrovirals I'm on react with aspirin or other over-the-counter headache remedies?

— Brain Damage

Dear Brain,
There, there, dear. Nurse knows how vexing those headaches can be. Why, I'm a martyr to them myself. My sure-fire remedy is two Percocets and an Absolut Bloody Mary, but I realize that most HIVers out there don't have the keys to the pharmacy's controlled-substance cabinet like I do.

Anyway, Brain, you're right to be cautious about taking any medications—over the counter or not—with your HIV drugs. Please do yourself, and your ever-fretting Nurse, a favor and consult your doctor if your headache is one of those pernicious types and lasts more than a day. There's a lethal chance that your ache stems from an odious infection like cryptococcal meningitis, toxoplasmosis, TB, CMV in the brain or syphilis and herpes.

Meantime, why not try some of Nursie's favorite chemical-free headache-killers? Acupuncture works wonders, if you're not afraid of needles. So does prick-free acupressure. And you don't have to live in California to feel the relief that yoga, meditation, biofeedback and even those lovely essential oils can bring if your headache is stress-related.

Of course if you're like me, you believe in better living through chemistry—and that means drugs! Get ready for a lecture. Over-the-counter pain relievers fall into some general categories: aspirin (e.g., Bayer, Bufferin and yummy orange St. Joseph's for children); acetaminophen (Tylenol); ibuprofen (it's a tongue-twister, so I ask for Advil or Motrin); naproxen sodium (sounds like a dessert, but it's Aleve); and ketoprofen (clerks know it as Orudis KT or Actron).

Here's Nurse's fine print, so read it: Aspirin may be known as the wonder drug, but you should avoid it like the, er, plague if you have ulcers, intestinal Kaposi's sarcoma, kidney dysfunction or low platelets. And if you take a pain reliever with acetaminophen, you should know that it zaps your body's store of glutathione, an important antioxidant. So get your AIDSy little hands on some of those things available at health food stores that will boost your glutathione: N-acetyl-cysteine (NAC), vitamin C, alpha-lipoic acid and L-glutamine.

Dear Nurse Know-It-All:
I have a chronic sinus problem that makes me want to literally cut off my nose to spite my face. What can I do to breathe a sigh of relief?

—A Nose Is a Nose

Dear Nose,
I don't want to sound like a snot, but your respiratory blockage is something many positoids have in common with neggies like moi. Pet dander and pollen reduce Nurse to a mean mucus machine. But Nose, you didn't write to hear about Nurse's non-life-threatening olfactory occlusions, did you?

To get back to your congested condition, your first course of action should be to have your doctor sniff out the problem. Sinus clogs are often the unpleasant result of bacterial infections. If that's the source of your nasal nastiness, follow your doctor's advice; you'll probably need to attack it with an aggressive combination of antibiotics and saline spraying. The antibiotics will wipe out the bacteria; the salty mist will take away the breeding ground those bugs love. A few weeks of this tried-and-true treatment can work wonders, believe me.

I wouldn't be true to my white uniform, however, if I didn't tell you that sinus congestion has causes other than fecund, free-loving bacteria. Allergic reactions to certain foods and environmental factors can also end in sinusitis. If your doctor worries that treating you to traditional anti-allergy injections will boost your viral load or be ineffective because of your weakened immune power, don't despair: Nurse has an ounce of prevention to prescribe.

Naturopaths swear by stinging nettle, an herb available at your local health food store. Two capsules three times a day could help prevent allergic reactions. And, I know it's hard, but cut out the foods that clog you up—more often than not those delicious dairy products. If the problem's one in your immediate environment, try to keep your living space clean and free of dust, pollen, mold and pet hair. How? If Lemon Pledge and air filters don't bore open those sinus passages, bring in Nurse Know-It-All's secret weapon: a maid. For God's sake, why clean your own house when professional help is available? After all, a cleaning person with good references is as essential to a PWA as a doctor who accepts managed-care plans.

This column offers self-help for nagging health problems. Send your own complaints to Nurse Know-It-All at 349 W. 12th St., New York, NY 10014, or e-mail at nurse@poz.com. When the nurse takes off her rubber-soled white shoes, Greg Lugliani steps into them with the answers and the attitude.

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