

SITTING PRETTY

Cross has taken up yoga to reduce stress and the risk of migraines.



Desperate for Relief

How Marcia Cross learned to manage her severe migraines—and found serenity on the smash hit ‘Desperate Housewives’

BY LINDA CHILDERS

Marcia Cross knew desperation long before she took up residence on Wisteria Lane. She was only 14 when her first migraine left her frightened and writhing in pain. For the next 20 years, migraines would drive her to the school nurse's office, off the set of the TV shows she starred on, and ultimately even to the emergency room.

These days, ironically, her character on the hit series “Desperate Housewives,” the Stepford-like Bree Van De Kamp, would seem an ideal candidate for migraines. Bree's tightly wound personality is strained by events that couldn't be more stressful: her first husband was killed by her psychotic suitor, her second husband murdered his first wife, her estranged teenage children are out of control, and not coincidentally she's got a drinking problem. All of which she tries to hide behind her porcelain smile and her perfect garden.

As hard as Bree Van De Kamp works to keep up appearances on Wisteria Lane, even Marcia Cross herself is surprised that her character hasn't suffered so much as a single headache in the first three seasons of TV's hottest show. “You know,” Cross muses, breaking into a genuine smile, “I might have to ask the writers about putting it in.”

Then again, as she's quick to point out, in real life she's nothing like the fictional Bree, who's a consummate control freak. “I'm actually very unorganized,” Cross laughs. “And I've learned not to

stress over things that used to bother me. If I stress about migraines, I'm more likely to get one.”

After 20 years of suffering from such debilitating headaches, Cross has learned ways to keep them at bay—a combination of stress management, dietary changes, and medication to abort migraines as soon as they start.

At 44, the actress whose migraines once controlled her life can now control them as well as Bree Van De Kamp controls her emotions.

Thirty years after that first migraine attack, Cross vividly remembers it as if she were actually sitting in her junior high school class in Marlborough, Mass. “It was a very scary experience,” she says. “My vision started to blur, and I remember thinking I might be having a stroke. I went to the school nurse, but the pain was so intense that I couldn't remember my home phone number. After my parents took me home, I remember lying in bed writhing in pain.”

That was the first of countless debilitating migraines. Cross would spend much of her adolescence lying in her bedroom with the lights dimmed, waiting for the overwhelming pain in her head to subside. Her headaches continued for years and, in college, they became especially intense and vice-like.

Cross was diagnosed with “classic” migraine. Unlike “common” migraines, which strike with no warning signs, sufferers of “classic” migraine experience a visual disturbance known as aura before the headache starts. Cross joined the one-sixth of migraine sufferers who experience aura, most commonly a visual or tingling sensation that foreshadows the attack.

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Yet even after the diagnosis, Cross continued to struggle with migraines because there were no effective treatments to manage them at the time. Back then, extensive research had yet to be done on migraines and few medications were available for patients who suffered such agonizing headaches.

“There were many days when I would just need to lie down and moan a lot,” Cross recalls. “The pain was so horrendous sometimes that I’d even lose a little part of my memory.”

Still, not even such excruciating headaches could stop her from landing a steady stream of acting roles. A decade before “Desperate Housewives” would earn her pop-icon status, she had her big break starring on another popular primetime soap opera, “Melrose Place.”



ROLE REVERSAL Cross was playing a doctor on “Melrose Place” when she finally found relief from her real-life migraines.

“I still get migraines from time to time,” Cross says. “But I take my medication as soon as I feel a headache coming on and I’m able to manage them much better. I’m not afraid of them anymore. I feel I have a handle on it.”

With the medication, she says, the migraine pain is bearable and rarely lasts more than five hours before she’s “back on my feet again.” Without the medication, though, the pain used to completely immobilize her for a day or more. And even when she wasn’t experiencing

a migraine, life was unpredictable and her personal relationships sometimes suffered.

“It was terribly frightening to not know when or where a migraine might strike,” she recalls. “I told my friends if we were out and if I had an attack to make sure I got home safely, but I often felt as if I were living underwater and out of touch with the rest of the world.”

Only by getting control of her headaches could she overcome that isolation and enjoy the next act of her life. This past June she married stockbroker Tom Mahoney, and they’re expecting twins next April. “I told Tom about my migraines shortly after we met and he’s been very supportive and protective,” Cross says. “He always makes sure I have my migraine medicine with me.”

Melrose Place” would be Cross’s breakthrough in more ways than one.

Art imitated life when her character, the psychotic Dr. Kimberly Shaw, also began suffering from migraines. And then, real life imitated art.

While filming a scene on the “Melrose Place” set, Cross started feeling nauseous, her fingers began to tingle, and she experienced aura in her peripheral vision. While she immediately recognized the symptoms of an impending migraine, nothing had prepared her for the magnitude of this particular attack. The pain became so severe that a “Melrose Place” colleague had to rush her to a local emergency room.

“In the ER, I was given a shot of pain medicine for my intense headache,” Cross recalls. “But more importantly, I learned from the colleague who took me to the hospital about a new migraine treatment called Imitrex. She said the tablets had significantly helped her headaches.”

Cross remembers that day in February 1996 as a turning point in her life. Desperate to finally find relief from the headaches that caused her so much suffering for so long, she then asked her doctor to prescribe Imitrex, the brand name of sumatriptan succinate. It’s among a class of drugs known as triptans, which are taken at the first signs of a headache to abort a full-blown migraine.

As messy as Bree Van De Kamp’s life is on ABC every Sunday night, Marcia Cross’s has never been better. Since “Desperate Housewives” became an overnight cultural phenomenon upon its 2004 premiere, she’s been enjoying the celebrity superstardom she earned for her role as America’s most desperate housewife. And this year alone, she’s enjoying her real-life marriage, pregnancy, and new home.

Yet for all those seemingly stressful life changes, Cross appears relaxed and stress-free during an interview with *Neurology Now* over a Labor Day Weekend break from shooting the top-rated series. She has learned how to use stress-reduction strategies to cope with all these stresses in her life and minimize the risk of migraines. “I started doing yoga and becom-



NEW WIVES' TALES Even on “Desperate Housewives,” Cross insists that her character Bree drink only white wine since red wine triggers her own real-life migraines.

ing more connected to my body,” she says.

In addition, Cross keeps track of possible triggers—including stress, lack of sleep, menstrual cycle, and any food and beverages consumed six to eight hours before the migraine hit. “I noticed that my food triggers included red wine, chocolate, oranges, and cheddar cheese,” she says, “and I eliminated them all from my diet.”

Having discovered that red wine was among her triggers, Cross insisted to the “Desperate Housewives” writers that her character drink only white wine last season when Bree was suffering from alcoholism. Of course, the white wine that Cross drank onscreen was, in reality, a nonalcoholic substitute.

In addition to all that, Cross also keeps a migraine diary. She recommends jotting down the frequency, severity, and length of your migraines.

Although migraines often run in families, Cross was the only one among her parents and two sisters to experience excruciating headaches. “I think we all carry stress in different areas of our body,” Cross says. “One of my sisters has stomachaches, while I tend to feel the effects of stress and tension in my head.”

Cross decided to speak out about her own struggle with migraines, becoming

a paid spokeswoman for GlaxoSmithKline, the maker of Imitrex. She wants to encourage fellow headache sufferers to see a doctor. And she wants to empower the 28 million Americans who suffer from migraines—especially women, who are affected three times more than men. “This is a condition that women need to take a proactive stance on,” she says. “As a society, we often take better care of our cars than our health.

It concerns me that half of all migraine sufferers remain undiagnosed.”

Cross acknowledges it can be challenging for migraineurs to be accurately diagnosed, and since symptoms vary from person to person, many don’t experience “classic” migraine symptoms—making diagnosis more difficult.

“I struggled for several years because at the time there was nothing that helped me with my migraines,” she says. “But today, this is definitely a condition you can do something about. There is no reason to suffer.”

Or be desperate. NN

Linda Childers is a health writer whose work has appeared in More and ePregnancy.

DESPERATE MEASURES

Experts’ Tips for Managing Migraines

Stress Management

- ☑ Try to limit stress in your life
- ☑ Keep a regular sleep schedule
- ☑ Practice relaxation techniques
- ☑ Exercise regularly

Diet

- ☑ Avoid foods linked to migraines, especially alcohol and caffeine
- ☑ Determine which foods trigger your migraines
- ☑ Don’t skip meals



For more information about migraines, see **RESOURCE CENTRAL** on page 46.