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What Triggers Migraines and What You Can Do About It!

Caffeine Withdrawal and Migraines

Taking in too much caffeine has been found to cause migraines. On the other hand taking in just enough caffeine has been found to successfully prevent migraines. What's the deal?

Caffeine withdrawal is the primary cause of caffeine-related migraines. Therefore, using caffeine as a preventative method in migraine relief can be done in two ways. The first is the easiest, and paradoxically also the most difficult. Simply limit your ingestion of caffeine to zero. No caffeine, no caffeine withdrawal. Get it?

The second method involves a little work, but it does work. All that is required is to take in enough caffeine over intervals that occur close enough together to ensure that you don't go into withdrawal. Both methods have their advantages and their disadvantages, both require certain sacrifices, but more importantly both work to keep caffeine withdrawal at bay which keeps migraines at bay.

You would think that complete abstinence from caffeine would thoroughly rid yourself of migraine headaches. And yet this is not always the case. In theory, it works just fine, but as a relief program it suffers the same fate as sexual abstinence: Not everybody is capable of sticking with the program; the urges are just too strong to deny. Another problem is that the all too easy intake of caffeine without realizing you are doing it. Complete and total caffeine abstinence requires educating yourself on all available sources of caffeine. It's not nearly enough just to give up coffee and Mountain Dew.

In order to successfully avoid caffeine you have to be aware of all the sources of caffeine. If you are going to take the route of giving up caffeine altogether, for instance, you'll have to be prepared to give up or use alternative non-caffeinated versions of: tea, chocolate, liqueur, pudding, pain-relief medications, energy drinks, diet pills, stay-away pills.

So perhaps, then, the route of maintaining caffeine intake appeals to you. The advantage here is that you don't have to print out a twenty-page list of all the products in the world that contains caffeine. You just merely need exert control over when you take in caffeine and how much you ingest. Once you establish that control, however, you can practically kiss your migraine goodbye.

This method involves the process of making sure you receive doses of caffeine. It works best if you set out a pattern whereby you can intake the caffeine at regular intervals. Now don't get all excited about stopping by Starbucks throughout the day or going to the coffeemaker. Coffee and tea rely on caffeine infusion methods and therefore aren't the best method of ingestion in this particular method. Because of the diffusion, your caffeine amount varies significantly from cup to cup. Ideally, you should purchase either caffeine tablets or soda. Using these gives you much more precision over controlling the amount of caffeine you are actually taking in.

You can find caffeine tablets that contain 100 mg or 200 mg per dose. Save yourself a little money by purchasing generic rather than brand name tablets. As for soda, the amount of caffeine varies somewhat with Mountain Dew on the high end, though if you want to take the trouble to search them out you can also find higher-dosage soft drinks specifically designed to you a jolt. For instance, Jolt Cola!

The following caffeine amounts are found in 12oz servings of these soft drinks:

- Mountain Dew: 55 mg of caffeine.
- Coca-Cola: 34 mg of caffeine
- Diet Coke: 45 mg of caffeine
- Pepsi Cola: 38 mg of caffeine

Once you have decided how you are going to go about ingesting the caffeine, the next thing to do is make sure you keep a detailed journal of your dosing. Keep an accurate record of the date and time you take the dose, the amount of the dose, how you ingested the dose (tablet, soft drink, medication, etc.), the time of dose and the amount of dose, etc.

Also note any headaches you get and be sure to include such information as date, duration of headache, severity, etc. If you don't see a change immediately, try altering it a little by either changing the times you ingest the caffeine or the amount. And make sure you keep to the regimen once you've found one that works.

Food Triggers

According to an ever-increasing number of studies, food and food additives are the most common trigger for migraine headaches. Some studies put food as the culprit behind kicking off the physiological reaction that causes migraine headaches in as much as seventy percent of cases. Other, however, lay the blame for good at a much lower percentage.

It would be an exercise in futility, or at least an exercise in filling up what precious free (headache-free) time you have to test every single food that is related to triggering migraines. You definitely get ahead in the showdown by becoming aware of what foods you commonly eat that are known to trigger the deathly, pounding pain that drives you mad.

Avoiding a suspected food trigger or group of food triggers entirely, however, is not the answer. Doing this can adversely affect other areas of your health, not to mention that you're just asking for headaches (migraine or otherwise) by skipping meals or not eating enough. Certain foods are almost guaranteed to be at the top of your list when hunting down the triggers of your migraines. For instance, foods that are rich in the amino acid tyramines (aged cheese, red wines) should always be considered.

In addition, if you eat a lot of hot dogs and deli foods and notice you have a lot of migraines as well, you should know that certain nitrates used in large amounts in these kinds of food are probably the trigger. Chocolate is often a major suspect in the hunt for the true killers of head peace because of its high content of phenylethylamine, but several studies have questioned the validity of this dichotomy. Monosodium Glutamate (MSG) is probably public enemy number one when it comes to food additives and migraines.

There simply isn't enough space here to provide a comprehensive list of all food and food additives suspect to play a part in triggering migraines, but here a list of the most common.

- peanuts and peanut butter
- caffeine in all products, not just coffee
- dairy products
- yeast
- some beans (which includes peanut), as well as broad, lima, Italian, lentil, soy, peas
- avocados
- dried meats
- sauerkraut
- pickled herrings
- canned soups and packet soup mixes
- chicken livers
- ripe banana
- soy products as well as the bean itself
- sodium nitrate, which is used to preserve hot dogs, bacon and cured meats
- the preservative benzoic acid and its associated compounds
- MSG, common name for monosodium glutamate, a flavor enhancer which is now in almost universal use in almost all processed foods
- nuts
- sourdough breads
- cheeses which have been aged, i.e. cheddar
- red wines, beer, champagne, vermouth
- chocolate
- anchovies

As alluded to early, going without food or severe curtailing of your diet is nothing but another trigger and should be avoided. Instead, plan regular meals throughout the day. You might want to try to a restrictive diet, in which you limit your food intake for about a month. (Restrictive diets are not recommended if you are pregnant, however, because by avoiding the potential trigger, you could also be upsetting your balance of nutrition.)

If you experience no change in your migraine routine, you can probably assume that your trigger is not food-related. On the other hand, should you find that migraine situation improves over the course of this restricted diet, then simply add foods back your daily routine one at a time. If it is a certain kind of food that you are eating turns out to be responsible, the headache should probably trigger within twelve hours of consumption.

Eating a certain food should trigger a headache within 12 hours. Then you can limit those few foods to which you are sensitive. Never restrict all your possible food triggers. For one thing,

it's probably not going to help you narrow it down and for another avoiding all your favorite foods is just going to make you more stressful which may trigger the headache anyway.

Test yourself with food triggers to determine if food actually is a trigger for you.

Fragrance Triggers

Of all the potential triggers for migraines, perhaps the most difficult to control are the ones involving aromas. Fragrant products are, in fact, frequent triggers for headaches, especially migraines. Unfortunately, it seems almost impossible to escape perfumes, colognes and any other of the million products that are enhanced with fragrances nowadays. Further making the situation worse is the fact that fragrances are encountered ever more increasingly in the workplace, as well other places where escape is akin to making your way off Alcatraz.

Fragrances have by now made their way into practically every industry and business on the planet. They are used in just about every cleaning, laundry, and personal-care product known to man, so think you just have to escape women wearing too much perfume or men doused in cologne.

People are quick to recognize the dangers of smoke and take steps to make accommodations, yet there remains a lack of awareness concerning the potential adverse health impact from the permeation of fragrances, whether pleasant or not. Indeed, it has yet to be recognized that the widespread use of fragrant products effects air quality and health just as much as secondhand smoke and other forms of pollution.

Aromatherapy is used by many, including those suffering migraines to alter one's mood, provide relaxation and stimulation and various other studies chemicals found in the essential oils used in aromatherapy lend credence to the existing pharmacological basis behind aromatherapy.

Perfumes and colognes currently being manufactured contain synthetic versions of the aromatic chemicals found in nature. The source may be different, but the song remains the same. The olfactory system is a busy highway when it comes to things affecting the brain and nervous system, whether by trigeminal stimulation, or absorption into the blood stream via the lungs.

Migraine headaches are typically caused by changes in blood flow to the vessels in the head. Some of the materials that are commonly found in fragrances possess the ability to alter blood flow in the brain. Several studies strongly support the idea that fragrances can have a direct effect on cerebral circulation as well as have neurological effects. In addition, the anecdotal evidence suggests a significant effect of fragrances on the central nervous system.

If you suffer from migraines, the following are among those may be adversely affecting your condition:

- scented deodorant or antiperspirant
- scented lotion, sunscreen or tanning cream for face, hands, or body (many lotions, especially sunscreens, have fragrance even when not labeled as being scented)

- aftershave or richly scented shaving lotion
- fragrance-enhanced bar or liquid soaps, including Dove, Ivory, Dial, soft-soap
- commercially fragrant shampoo or conditioner, hair spray, gel, mousse or other
- leave-in hair products
- essential oils
- any perfume, cologne or fragrance
- aromatherapy products
- laundry detergent with phosphates, chlorine bleach, and/or added scent
- scented fabric softener sheets (for example, Bounce) or liquid fabric softener
- recently dry cleaned items (remove plastic wrapping and air outdoors before use)
- cigarette, incense (unlit or burned), or other smoke
- air freshener sprays or solids, potpourri, scented candles

If you suffer from migraines and discovered that your trigger is fragrance-related, you can expect to face quite a bit of difficulty in your life. Compounding the problem is that even brief exposure to the fragrance can be enough to trigger a headache. With so many products on the market saturated with fragrance-producing chemicals, it's an uphill battle getting away from any one particular.

It certainly helps to identify the particular fragrance that triggers your migraine, but unfortunately many for whom smells are a trigger find that it's not just one in particular that does the trick. Sometimes it's smell and aromas in general that cause the headaches. In addition, the problem is further exacerbated by the fact that the onset of the headache can vary from a few minutes of exposure to hours after. There is an unquestioned need to raise awareness about the impact of fragrances on development of migraines.

Migraines and Birth Control Pills

Women who take the combined oral contraceptive pill have a slightly increased risk of suffering a stroke compared to the general risk. Women who also suffer from migraines have a slightly increased risk of stroke compared to the general risk and the risk even increases in women who suffer specifically from migraines with aura.

Women who are taking the combined oral contraceptive and suffer from migraines of either kind, but especially those with aura run a slightly higher risk of stroke than do women who either take the pill and don't suffer migraines or suffer migraines and don't the pill. The risk is small, but it's a good idea to be educated about these risks regardless.

A headache is simply a symptom of a migraine. It's not the migraine itself. In addition to the headache, roughly twenty-five percent of migraine sufferers also suffer from aura, which is a best defined as a visual disturbance that includes temporary loss of vision, flashing lights, zigzagging lines, black spots, etc. In addition, those suffering migraine with aura may experience numbness or the feeling of pins and needles, as well as experiencing strange smells, unusual food cravings, etc. An aura typically lasts from a few minutes to an hour before the actual headache sets in.

There are several medical guidelines that you should be aware of if you are a migraine sufferer taking oral contraceptive pills.

Plainly put, it is recommended that you do not take the pill or refrain from continuing use of the pill if you are already taking it if you:

- have migraines with aura.
- develop migraine with aura sometime after starting the pill. In other words, it is highly recommended that cease use of the pill if this type of migraine develops.
- have migraines without aura, and you have more than one additional risk factor for stroke.

Other risk factors to be aware of include:

- if you are 35 years old or older
- if you are a diabetic.
- If you have a close relative who has suffered a stroke, heart attack, or similar 'vascular' disease before they were 45.
- a high lipid (cholesterol) level.
- high blood pressure.
- obesity.
- smoking.
- have status migrainous. These are migraine headaches with a duration in excess of seventy-two hours.
- treat your migraine with ergotamine or ergot derivatives.

If you have migraines without aura, along with only one of the additional risk factor for stroke, then you may take a low dosage oral contraceptive pill that contains thirty micrograms or less of estrogen.

If you have migraine without aura, and have no additional risk factors for stroke at all, the pill is usually fine to take.

If you have any questions about any of these guidelines, you should consult your physician.

There exist various methods of contraception for women with migraine who are unable to take the combined contraceptive pill such as the progestogen-only pill, the progestogen injection, intra-uterine devices or systems, and barrier methods.

Some women taking the pill find that they experience migraines during the 'pill free' interval, at the end of each pack. These migraines are thought to be triggered by the drop in the blood level of estrogen in the pill free interval. Provided these are migraines without aura, there typically is no need to stop taking the pill. However, if the migraines are accompanied by aura, you should stop taking it. Should these migraines become a major problem that are not easily treated with painkillers, then you might wish to consider the following options:

- Changing to a pill with less progestogen (if you take one with a high dose). Migraines during the pill-free interval seem to occur less often in women who take a pill with a lower dose of progestogen.

- Tri-cycling. This means taking the pill continuously for three packets (nine weeks) without any breaks, followed by a seven-day pill-free interval. This keeps the level of estrogen constant whilst you take the three packets. (It is the sudden drop in estrogen that often triggers the migraine.) By doing this you will have less withdrawal bleeds per year, and therefore less migraines.

- estrogen supplements can be used during the seven-day pill-free interval.

- A change to a different method of contraception.

Migraines and Pregnancy

No one is exempt from migraines and women are especially prone so it's just a matter of averages to expect that migraines will affect pregnancies. Women should naturally be concerned about taking medications during pregnancy, whether over the counter or prescription, and since most people turn automatically to medication to treat the severe headaches caused by migraines, it's doubly important to be aware of the consequences of taking migraine medication during pregnancy.

Unfortunately, the plain fact of the matter is that the effects of most headache medications on pregnant women and their unborn children still remains in the dark. Because of this uncertainty, women who suffer from migraines really need—when possible, of course—to work their migraine relief into their pregnancy plan right from the beginning, even before conception. Most experts in migraine prevention and relief strongly advise a slow tapering off medication prior to attempting to conceive. A slow tapering off means about a week, by the way, not several months.

Of course, many women suffer from headaches far too extreme to even consider tapering off their medication. If this is the case with you, it is highly recommended that before attempting to become pregnant you make an appointment with your doctor and to talk over the risks of sticking with your medications while pregnant.

It's been well established that some medications such as Depakote have caused birth defects, but many other preventative medications such as beta-blockers and tricyclics have been proven relatively safe. If you're taking drugs by injection, like Imitrex, you'll definitely have to stop taking it because there just simply isn't enough evidence of its safety during pregnancy.

Since most birth defects occur during the first few months of life, often before the mother even realizes she is pregnant at all, it is not a good idea to wait until confirming the pregnancy before making decisions on medication and pregnancy.

Of course, there is more to pregnancy and migraines than just being careful with medication. Pregnancy means food cravings and food cravings means eating things you don't normally eat, or least eating them in a bulk you don't normally eat them in. Food and food additives are major league triggers of migraines so when pregnant, be sure to be careful about what you eat.

In particular, avoid foods high in MSG and stay away from strong aged cheeses, which are well known triggers for migraine attacks. It couldn't hurt to avoid low blood sugar by eating complex carbohydrates rather than refined sugars. On the other hand, when using sugar substitutes be sure to stay away from aspartame (NutraSweet).

Generally speaking, a woman who doesn't have any other health problems besides migraines probably doesn't run any special risk. On the other hand, if your first migraine onsets during pregnancy, it is vitally important to get to a doctor so that he can rule out any other dangerous conditions such brain hemorrhage, meningitis, or even tumors. Further testing may be needed to determine the cause of the headache.

Migraine treatment during pregnancy tends to be of the medical alternative variety such as the use of cold packs, darkened room, and sleep. Although caffeine is one of the trickiest of all food-related migraine triggers to deal with, taking it in small doses during the first trimester is usually safe, as is the use of acetaminophen in small doses.

When it comes to both pregnancy in general and migraines in general, one of the best thing you do to is to relieve the amount of stress in your life. Yes, it's very easy to say you're going to reduce stress and it's altogether something else to actually do it, but if you can take small steps here and there to reduce or eliminate tension-causing elements from your life, you'll be surprised at the effect it has on your migraines. Not to mention the effect it will have on your pregnancy.

One last thing to be aware of concerning pregnancy and migraines. Patients are often giving hormones to induce labor and this frequently causes migraines. Labor is painful enough without adding migraine pain to it so be sure your delivery care person knows you are prone to migraines before the decision is made to induce labor.

Migraines and Stress

When it comes to choosing the all-time champion of migraine triggers, it all boils down to two contenders and all the others are mere pretenders. Much research has been done into the various triggers of migraine and basically the verdicts have come down squarely into two camps. Many researchers have decided that food and food additives are the main culprit behind triggering migraines. On the other hand, many researchers are adamant that the primary trigger for migraines is stress.

The wisdom concerning eliminating the stress in our lives is hardly relegated to migraine relief. Stress seems to be blamed for just about every ailment experienced in the modern world. The simple, inescapable fact of life is that stress is now and is probably always going to be a daily part of our lives that can never be eliminated. Even the mere reduction of stress levels is

difficult. The management of all aspects of life from family to career to raising children to school all offer some kind of stress.

The Most Common Stresses That Trigger Migraines.

Multiple-Role Stress: Females especially must contend with multiple-role stress, the juggling of many responsibilities such as wife, worker and mother.

Workplace Stress: There is no such thing as a stressless job. It doesn't matter whether you're the CEO of a multinational conglomerate or the checkout person at the supermarket, you will be stressed out by your job.

Financial Stress: Not being able to meet bills, not making as much as you want, not making as much as your neighbor; these are all stresses connected with finances. The number one cause of divorce is money issues so it should come as no surprise that worry over finances can trigger migraines.

Caregiver Stress: Women are likely to suffer this stress the most, though more and more men are choosing to become stay at home dads. There are untold riches in being a parent, but it can also be quite taxing and stressful.

All of these stressors individually trigger migraines, but most often it's the combination of all of them working together that cause that explosion inside your head.

The Impact of Mood on Headaches

Personality: A migraine is a disease, not a psychological disorder, and contrary to popular belief the majority of headache patients do not suffer any serious psychological problems. Research from hundreds of studies that have examined the personalities and behaviors of migraine sufferers have delivered no evidence whatever that concludes there is any particular personality type prone to suffering migraines.

Depression: Depression can reduce the body's ability to respond effectively to medication. If your migraine medicine isn't doing the trick, it may be because you suffer from depression. Women in particular are at risk for depression, though the effect is the same on both genders. Depression also occurs more often in migraine patients than in those who don't suffer migraines.

Even mild depression can diminish the efficacy of both medical treatment and behavioral treatments such as biofeedback and relaxation methods. Because of the possibility that treatment for migraines could be diminished, therefore, it is highly recommended that you discuss this issue with your doctor who may be better able to select treatments that can effectively relieve symptoms of both headache and depression.

Anxiety: Anxiety is basically a state of nervousness or tension that occurs without any particular reason. Much like depression anxiety can work to lower one's ability to handle stress. Anxiety can also raise the level of pain or lower your tolerance for pain during a headache, which can seriously impair the effectiveness of any medication used to treat headache pain. For some

sufferers, it is necessary to treat both the anxiety and the headaches in order to get both under control.

Treatment

If depression or anxiety is present in a patient with migraine, both disorders need to be treated. It is generally not true that treating the depression will make the headaches go away, or that headache improvement will lead to an improvement in mood. Specific treatment for both migraine and depression exists and will produce the best outcome.

Migraines and The Holiday Season

The holiday season can play havoc with your migraines. All the bright lights and music and stress just doesn't equate with jolly headache-free fun. But by planning ahead you can make the holiday season a little more bearable and maybe even more fun.

Make lists and check them twice.

Dealing with migraines is all about organization. If you properly organize your life, you can avoid a lot of migraine misery. When organizing for the holidays, start early and play ahead as far as you can. Write down what should be done and allow for easy editing and updating. Make lists of what needs to be done. Keep these lists on your computer so you can update them and use them again next year.

Print new copies as you update them, and put them in an obvious place such as on the refrigerator. Pain fog makes it too easy to forget where we put the list we made. Ugh! As soon after an event or holiday, make notes in your list files to help you make them better for the next time you need them.

Get your shopping done early.

The stress involved in holiday shopping is usually too much even for those who don't suffer from migraines. The crowds, the lights, all those Christmas-related fragrances. By shopping in advance all those things can be avoided.

Shop online.

Heck, why bother going to the mall or stores at all? Just sit at your computer and order anything you want for anybody you want no matter where they live. Even if you forget something or else find a great bargain at the last minute it will still probably get there on time.

Eat sensibly.

Well, you know how the holidays are. If you aren't eating big fatty foods then you're eating fast foods that you know contain migraine triggers up the wazoo. If you know you're going to

be away from home, then plan to eat somewhere not so crowded and that serves food that you don't have to worry will trigger the headache.

If you have food triggers, holiday meals prepared by others can be a problem. Offer to bring a dish with you. Make something you know you can eat, then select carefully from other dishes. Explain the situation to your host or hostess in advance. Some of those trigger foods are going to be tempting, so consider the consequences when you make your choices.

Know what triggers your migraine make others deal with it.

If you're lucky enough to know what is going to set your migraine off and you know that the holiday season is going to bring you into close proximity with those triggers, don't give in just to keep the peace. Let your family, friends and co-workers know that getting near that stuff will make your head explode. Many of us know our head pain triggers, and many of us try to just put up with it "for the sake of the family." Our families enjoy holidays more if we're with them and well. Be honest with those around you and urge them to help you in avoiding them rather than making you feel guilty for ruining the fun.

Check your medications.

Trying to get a refill on a dwindling supply of medication can be quite difficult. Either the doctor isn't in or the pharmacy closes early. Make sure ahead of time that you can get a refill if you are running low and make sure to take it with you if go out of town.

Be anal-retentive when planning for holiday travel.

If you are going to be out of town during the holidays, cover every possible emergency that could arise. As previously noted, make sure you don't forget your medicine. Keep the medication in containers in which you got them so there will be no mistakes.

Stick to your schedule.

Two of the biggest triggers for head pain can be improper sleep and not eating at regular times. Try to keep as close to your regular schedule as possible. Carry non-trigger snacks with you so you can have a snack if a meal isn't going to be available when you need to eat.

MSG and Migraines

Monosodium Glutamate (MSG) should always be considered a prime suspect when on the lookout for a food-related migraine trigger. With many studies claiming that a majority of migraines are triggered by food or food additives, it's almost a given that MSG should be on your lookout list.

What is Monosodium Glutamate? MSG is a neurotoxin, a toxic substance used to fool the brain into telling your tastes buds that the food you're eating tastes better than it really does.

Known as a flavor enhancement agent, the end result is that the food industry can use substandard ingredients and then kick up the taste a notch by adding MSG.

Okay, so MSG is another way that big business sticks it to the man. But how that does affect migraines? Frankly, no study has yet been conducted that certifiably links MSG to migraine development. However, several studies have been done linking certain foods to migraines and many foods that have been linked in a number of those studies have something in common: MSG consistently shows up studies validating direct-acting vasoactive substances as causing diet-related migraine headaches.

Further adding fuel to the fire is Chinese Restaurant Syndrome. Chinese Restaurant Syndrome is a collection of symptoms that people experience within thirty minutes after eating at Chinese restaurants. Among these symptoms is migraines. What has this do with MSG? Chinese food is notorious for containing high levels of MSG and, in fact, it is theorized that the MSG content is the reason for people feeling hungry so quickly after finishing their meal at a Chinese restaurant.

The problem with MSG and migraines is that MSG is often hidden and is sometimes labeled under other names. Food processing companies are allowed to use different names for MSG so that those who know to avoid it often face an uphill battle when attempting to control their intake by reading labels.

When you see these products on a food label, you can be sure that it always contains MSG:

- Monosodium Glutamate (MSG)
- Autolyzed Yeast, Yeast Extract
- Gelatin
- Glutamic Acid
- Hydrolyzed Protein: (plant, vegetable, any kind)
- Monopotassium Glutamate
- Sodium or Calcium Caseinate
- Textured Protein
- Yeast Food, Yeast Nutrient

When you see the following on a food label, it means they often contain MSG or create MSG during the processing:

- Natural flavor, flavoring, flavors (The Food & Drug Administration of the United States has defined all MSG as naturally-occurring, but natural and safe do not necessarily always go hand in hand)
- Bouillon or Stock
- Broth (chicken, beef, any kind)
- Carrageenan
- Malt Extract or Flavoring, Malted Barley
- Maltodextrin
- Soy sauce, soy protein isolate, soy protein concentrate.
- Whey protein, whey protein concentrate, whey protein isolate.
- anything Protein fortified

Obviously, the first step in controlling the effects of MSG on your migraines is to begin limiting your intake of MSG. Except that you can't make that the first step because your first step has to be educating yourself about what kinds of food products this hidden MSG shows up in.

You know that Chinese food is loaded with MSG, but did you know that sports drinks such as Gatorade and Powerade are also loaded with MSG? How about certain candies and gum? Those last two are especially difficult to study because their labels are usually written so minutely that even if you know what the words mean it's difficult to read them correctly.

Here are a few simple rules that can generally be followed, though to be sure it's always best to read the label carefully and educate yourself thoroughly.

Fresh fruits and veggies, steaks and roasts are usually safe to eat provided you've carefully cleansed or prepared them. Breads items and baked items often consist of autolyzed yeast, yeast extract, or some other covert MSG. When it comes to migraines, MSG and bakeries the old saying caveat emptor applies; the buyer should definitely beware. Bakery items filled with fruit normally contain MSG.

Canned tunafish and salmon, etc. almost always contain MSG in some form. Lunchmeats are usually unsafe since nearly all deli meat contains MSG. Bacon and ham are nearly always going to be spiced up. Most salad dressings have MSG, though the gourmet brands typically are safe. Almost all canned or frozen soups have MSG.

An MSG-free diet is possible, but difficult. It takes work, but if your migraines are triggered by it, it's work well worth it.

Sex and Migraines

Funny thing about sex. It can be incredibly positive and incredibly negative. The same goes for sex and migraines. There does seem to be some sort of link between sex and migraines, but it is still unclear exactly what that link is.

Sexually triggered headaches have been reported by people engaging in all kinds of sex acts, from masturbation to intercourse, with or without orgasm. Some headaches even seem to have been caused more by the position people got themselves into than the actual sex act in which they were engaging. Although they do occur, sexually triggered headaches appear to be rather rare, affecting roughly one out of every 350 headaches or so. Even so, the problem is widespread and has a major lifestyle effect on those who get them.

When sexual activity causes migraine attacks its called coital cephalgia, exertional headache, or effort Migraine. As the names suggest, these headaches may be merely exertional headaches brought about by sex or any other strenuous activities. They may or may not be linked to orgasm or sexual arousal.

Coital headaches are far more common among males than females and often last a day or more. Headaches or Migraine attacks induced by sexual activity may strike prior to, at the time of, or following orgasm.

Headaches instigated by sexual activity have been divided into three patterns. Sudden onset applies to almost three-quarters of them, beginning either right before, during, or immediately after orgasm. This headache is normally quite severe and can either build slowly or suddenly explode inside your head.

The sub-acute pattern applies to only one-quarter of instances and begins before orgasm with intensity building until orgasm. The pain associated with this type is a dull ache. It is occasionally accompanied by nausea and vomiting. The least common pattern is the postdural headache in which the pain is located the lower back of the head and increases upon standing erect. It is often accompanied by nausea and vomiting.

If coital headaches become chronic it is advised that you take migraine medication. Be sure to check with a physician if you experience an explosive headache brought on by exertion. It may be more than a headache and could lead to an aneurysm.

However, all is not bad news when it comes to sex and migraines. Sexual activity can actually be used as treatment for migraines. A study conducted at the Headache Clinic of Southern Illinois University found that some women actually were able to relieve their migraine headache pain through achieving orgasm.

While the level of the relief varied, those who obtained complete relief represented the highest percentage. In comparison to medications, orgasm as a method of relieving migraine is less effective, but provides relief much quicker when it does so. This particular study did not involve men, but there exists plenty of other evidence suggesting that sex may work to relieve migraines in males as well.

Other studies have found that sexual activity and orgasm triggers an endorphin rush in the brain. This chemical reaction works as sort of a natural analgesic to block pain. In regard to how sex works in conjunction with migraines, serotonin is released during orgasm, causing a constriction of the dilated blood vessels in the brain that were causing the migraine. The increased endorphin usually last anywhere from one to three hours.

Ultimately, then, the question of whether sex is good or bad for headaches is left unanswered. For some people sexual activity must be considered a trigger, while for others a method of treatment. Once again when it comes to migraines, there is no concrete answer and it seems as though more questions are raised than answered. The key is to explore both sides of the issue and not be inhibited by embarrassment. If sex does seem to cause your headaches, be honest with your partner and your doctor. On the other hand, don't be afraid to try out sex as pathway toward relief. Even if it doesn't work, it's worth the old college try.

What You Should Know About Aspartame and Migraines

When it comes migraines, better to put on pounds than drink diet sodas. Diet sodas sweetened with aspartame, at any rate. In case you that word doesn't ring a bell, how about NutraSweet? Equal? Little blue packages in the sugar bowl on restaurant tables?

If you were to go solely by the information about aspartame that you can find on the internet, you might every well think this product was created by the devil himself. Truly, the amount of web space devoted to attacking aspartame and its brand name NutraSweet is phenomenal.

The product has been vilified like almost no other product on the market, blamed for everything from memory loss to schizophrenia. Although the jury is still out on aspartame's culpability in relation to many dangers, there is no getting around the fact that aspartame has been linked to migraines in many studies.

Aspartame is used in NutraSweet, an artificial sweetener. But aspartame isn't really a sweetening agent. What aspartame does is release an amino acid neurotransmitter in the brain called aspartame. In essence, though approved by the FDA as a sweetener, aspartame is really a drug.

The New England Journal of Medicine, a world-renowned medical journal, has conducted studies that have found a connection between heavy consumption of diet drinks sweetened with aspartame and migraine headaches. One study in particular seems heavily slanted toward finding a connection as those taking part reported having headaches on 33% of the days in which the study was conducted as opposed to the control group which reported headaches on only 24% of the days.

One scientist who has conducted research came to the startling conclusion that 90% of all migraines are caused by allergic reactions to food or food additives. His findings also suggest that aspartame is the most common food additive related to migraines. Another study came to an equally amazing conclusion that 10% of all migraines are related to aspartame consumption.

A study conducted at the Univ. of Florida came to perhaps the most jaw-dropping conclusion of them all, finding that aspartame increased the frequency of migraine headaches in over fifty percent of the patients who took part in the study.

Despite all these studies, however, no conclusion has yet been drawn which firmly establishes what it is about aspartame that causes migraines in headache sufferers. The prevailing theory has to do with a biochemical known as serotonin. You may have heard that word before. Indeed, serotonin pops up quite in medical stories as it seems play a part in conditions ranging from appetite loss to mood alteration to sleep problems.

When it comes to migraines, serotonin is thought to play a part through the lowering of levels of it in your body thanks to the effects of aspartame, thereby exacerbating pre-existing conditions that cause migraines. So it's really no so much a case of aspartame being the cause of migraines, but rather being a quick-drawing finger on the trigger.

Believe it or not, there's also a danger from ceasing your intake of aspartame. Doesn't that figure? If you are currently drinking a large amount of diet sodas or using a lot of NutraSweet in your coffee or tea, the one thing you don't want to do is suddenly stop for a few months and then go back. Many people report that they quit having headaches after stopping their use of products containing aspartame. Then they resumed their use of aspartame and were unfortunate enough to find that the headaches returned and were far worse than before.

Naturally, the makers of NutraSweet dispute any connection existing between their product and migraines. Then again, they dispute any connection between aspartame and any health concern. The bottom line is that enough complaints have been filed with the FDA and enough studies have been conducted to establish at the very least a large amount of anecdotal evidence suggesting a connection. And since even the big two soft drink makers have products diet products that sweeten with Splenda—a sweetener with no bitter aftertaste—there really isn't any reason at all to take the risk.

Top Controllable and Uncontrollable Migraine Triggers

The pain associated with migraine headaches is caused by a physiological reaction within the cranial blood vessels. There are, however, many environmental triggers that can cause that biological reaction. Some of these triggers are, thankfully, somewhat controllable. On the other hand, some of them cannot be controlled at all, at least not unless you undertake a lifestyle change.

Uncontrollable Migraine Triggers

Weather

Weather changes are one of the most common, not to mention probably being the least controllable, triggers for a migraine. Most people who suffer from migraines need not invest in a barometer to know when the pressure is dropping. Those living in hurricane areas can tell days beforehand if one of those monster storms is on the way. Any drop in the barometric pressure that occurs in combination with an approaching warm front should be considered a possible trigger for an intense migraine episode.

If there remains any doubt that those who claim weather changes coincide with their headaches, consider that a study conducted by The New England Center for Headache resulted in 51% of respondents showing sensitivity to weather patterns. While no one can control the weather, if your headaches are simply unbearable you might very well consider moving to somewhere with a significantly different climate.

Environmental factors

Among the many environmental factors that affect frequency of migraine headaches that are difficult to escape and almost impossible to control are intense odors and aromas, fumes, tobacco smoke and bright lights. With the increased move toward marginalizing cigarette

smokers and the banning of smoking from an ever-increasing multitude of public places, it is becoming somewhat easier to escape from tobacco smoke.

Escaping from bright lights may be easy at home, but when you're at work it's going to prevent a challenge unless you have a very accommodating boss. As for smells, you're going to have to do some work to figure out which particular odors are pulling the trigger. Once you figure it out, then you can decide on how much trouble it will be to eliminate them.

Hormones

Often it isn't until young girls begin menstruation that migraines begin. One possible explanation for this is has to do with low levels of estrogen and hormonal fluctuation around the onset of puberty. The good news is that many women report that migraines completely disappear after menopause. Unfortunately, many other women report that their migraines increase in intensity around the same time. Beware of engaging in hormone replacement therapy or taking oral contraceptives as well, as both could possibly increase the frequency of migraines.

Migraine Triggers That Can Be Controlled

Sleeping and waking routines

Either too much sleep or too little sleep can become a trigger for a migraine. It's difficult to control getting more or less, but if you can establish a routine and develop sleeping habits that can be followed religiously every day, then you may be surprised at just how quickly your migraines hit the road.

Food triggers

Various studies have pointed the finger at food as being the primary culprit when it comes to triggering migraines. Indeed, some studies have concluded that up to 25% of migraines may be caused by dietary factors. Many foods, food additives and other food-related constituents contain chemicals that affect blood pressure and it is this effect on the constriction of cranial vessels that triggers the migraines.

Among those chemicals that are found in food that have been linked to migraine development:

- Tryamine - found in some cheeses, red wine, pickled fish, and certain types of processed meat.
- Phenyl ethylamine
- Sodium
- Monosodium glutamate (MSG)
- Histam 5

Among the foods that have been identified by the National Headache Foundation as playing a role in migraine development are:

- Chocolate, cocoa and carob

- Nuts (including peanut butter even though peanuts are not a nut, but a legume)
- Citrus fruits, bananas, figs, red plums, and raisins
- Beans
- Bananas
- Pickles, marinated food.
- Dairy products
- Aspartame (NutraSweet)
- Overripe fruits
- Fermented products: soy sauce / breads with high yeast content.

What You Need to Know About Over-The-Counter Migraine Medication

Several reports have concluded that overusing over the counter migraine medication often results in rebound headaches. All of these medicines are recommended to be stored in an area where the temperature is between twenty to twenty-five degrees Celsius or sixty-eight and seventy-seven degrees Fahrenheit.

If you live somewhere where this can't be accomplished be aware that the effectiveness of these medications can be compromised. Also of concern is if you receive your medication by mail. Leaving the medicine in your mailbox in temperatures outside the recommended range for even a few hours can seriously impair their effectiveness.

Most of these medications warn against the same type of side effects, but the frequency of complaints about those side effects vary tremendously from one user to another.

Excedrin Migraine

Active Ingredients: Acetaminophen 250mg, Aspirin 250mg, Caffeine 65mg.

Forms: Geltabs, Tablets, Capsules.

The recommended dose of Excedrin Migraine is two tablets taken at six-hour intervals. Excedrin Migraine actually contains the exact same ingredient combination as Excedrin Extra Strength. In fact, the only difference between Excedrin Migraine and Excedrin Extra Strength is that Excedrin Migraine comes with instructions containing a warning about treating migraines. The instructions warn patients to consult with a physician if their headache is accompanied by vomiting or requires bed rest. Excedrin Extra Strength also does not specifically contain migraines under its use section.

Excedrin has established a fine reputation among consumers. Usually it ranks at or near the top in customer satisfaction surveys.

Advil Migraine

Active Ingredients: Ibuprofen 200mg. Also contains 20mg of potassium.

Forms: Liquid filled capsule.

Important information: In the United States Advil Migraine is the only over the counter migraine medication available in liquid capsule form.

You should be aware that Advil Migraine contains the exact same ingredients as regular Advil. Customer satisfaction concerning this product varies. While many report that their recommended dosage often relieves their pain, many other complain that one must exceed dosage in order to get relief. Others complain that it upsets their stomach if they don't take it on a full stomach. Still others have complained about side effects such as nausea (see above), hives, swelling, etc. And yet others are simply unwilling to pay the extra price for this medication when they can buy the exact same medication under the regular Advil label.

Motrin Migraine Pain

Active Ingredient: Ibuprofen 200mg.

Forms: Caplets.

Contains the exact same ingredients as Motrin IB. You should be aware that Motrin Migraine pills are smaller than most other migraine pills. The advantage here is that they are easier to swallow, but at the same time because they are so small they could easily be mistaken for candy by a small child so be sure to keep them out of reach of the young ones. As with Advil, although perhaps even more, customer satisfaction truly runs the gamut when it comes to Motrin.

Some migraine sufferers absolutely swear by it, while others say they will never take it again. There doesn't seem to be any pattern as to why it works so well on some patients and not at all on others. It is recommended that you at least try Motrin because it just may be the answer to your prayers. On the other hand it may do you good at all. So therefore you've got all to gain and only a little bit of money to lose.

Naproxen

Naproxen is in a class of drugs called nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) that work by reducing hormones that cause inflammation and pain in the body. Naproxen is sold under a wide variety of brand names across the world, including Aleve, Anaprox and Naprosyn.

TheraPatch Headache Cool Gel

One of the latest products to hit the markets are pads that can be placed on the forehead, temple or the back of the head which contain a gel that cools the skin for up to four hours. You can get the TheraPatch in two forms. One contains no medication whatever, while the other uses the patch as a device to deliver an analgesic. TheraPatch Cool contains menthol, camphor and methyl salicylate, while TheraPatch Warm contains capsaicin. LecTec is also offering medicinal patch products as a drug delivery alternative in the cough-cold and anti-itch sections.

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