

MICHAEL VAN STRATEN

Fact sheet

MIGRAINE AND HEADACHES

Eat plenty of: oily fish - salmon, mackerel, pilchards and sardines - and take a fish oil supplement, all have a gentle anti-inflammatory action. Ginger in cooking, as tea or tablets to relieve nausea and stimulate the circulation. Green olives, seeds, liver, lobster and best of all oysters for their high copper content, a deficiency of which appears to be linked with recurrent headaches. Extra virgin olive oil, avocados, pine kernels, sunflower seeds, sesame seeds and wheatgerm which are rich in vitamin E, essential for the vascular system.

Cut down on: Chocolate, citrus fruits, red wines, cheese, yeast products and herrings which contain amines, and nitrates and nitrites used as preservatives in meat products like hot dogs, salami, ham, bacon, salt beef, pastrami and patés. These chemicals are common headache triggers.

Avoid caffeine - in coffee, tea and cola drinks - it narrows the tiniest blood vessels in the brain causing a rise in pressure. Monosodium glutamate may also cause headaches and if you are a regular sufferer, avoid it.

Baked beans, butter beans, broad beans and peapods (mange tout) are an unlikely cause of headaches but more common than you may think, together with nuts and even peanut butter, which adversely affects some sufferers.

If you keep a careful food diary and note when you get your headaches, you should be able to make the right deductions from this simple piece of detective work. Sometimes it's easier to exclude all the possible triggers and add them back one at a time. You'll soon find out which are your personal culprits.

Whether you suffer from migraine or your headaches are caused by stress, anxiety, tension or even blocked sinuses, they are all related to changes in the blood supply to the brain. For this reason, foods which help and those which are likely triggers of your pain are a vital part of the headache diet.

Half of all women get headaches, but only one third of men. Over seven million are migraine sufferers - twice as many women than men endure this torture, and more than 60 million working days are lost each year throughout the country, at a cost approaching £20 million, due to headaches.

Tension Headaches are the most common of all. The 'tension' can be mental, physical, or both, and the pain is caused by pressure on the nerves of the base of the skull, in the scalp and face, and on blood vessels.

If you feel like there is a tight band around your head, pressure behind the eyes, throbbing sensations, or that your head is 'bursting' - then you have a tension headache.

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Bad posture, activities like painting the ceiling or hard digging, knitting, hanging curtains and frequently the way you do things at work, may all trigger the muscle spasm that causes tension. Left-handers have special difficulties as most work stations are designed the wrong way round for them.

Arthritis in the neck, whiplash injuries, tooth grinding or an uneven bite, bad car seats and long distance driving, even uncomfortable glasses which irritate the muscles of the forehead, can all be the start of a headache.

Warm baths, with a few drops of lavender oil added; massage, gentle stretching exercises, aromatherapy and some of the calming herbs, like valerian will all help. Chamomile, lime blossom or elder flower teas are relaxing, safe and effective.

If you leave home without breakfast, have two cups of coffee at work, and eat your first bite when the sandwiches arrive at lunch time, don't be baffled when you start a headache in the middle of the morning. It is often the first sign of hunger, and starts as your blood sugar level falls. Eat something as soon as possible, or, better still have breakfast, and the pain will go in a few minutes.

Eye strain is another common cause. Watching too much TV, sitting too close to the screen in the cinema, staring at a computer, or trying to read when you may need glasses, can all be the culprits.

A stuffy nose, bunged up sinuses or a constant drip, frequently result in severe discomfort and headache. Reducing the amount of dairy products you consume also reduces the amount of mucus you produce and eating at least two cloves of fresh garlic a day helps to clear the passages.

Petrol fumes, varnish, paint or even nice smells like perfume, are sometimes responsible. Where you work, or sleep, can have an effect too. Apart from postural considerations, air conditioning, poor lighting, central heating, noise, soft beds or too many pillows are the main culprits. Too much or too little sleep is another consideration - how often do you get up with a pain in the head, after a lie-in on Sunday morning?

The 'ice-cream' headache is started by eating, or drinking, very cold things. The pain is sharp, but won't last long - a minute or two usually. But sex and headache is not a joke. The muscles at the back of the neck sometimes get very tense as a result of sexual arousal, and the peaceful afterglow is marred by a headache. Some gentle massage is usually all that's needed.

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There can't be many people who don't either suffer from migraine, or know someone who does. The blinding headaches, the sickness and vomiting, the sensitivity to sound and light, and the utter wretchedness of the severe migraine sufferer, have only to be seen once, never to be forgotten.

Women are more likely to have this condition than are men, though in children, the illness is divided equally between boys and girls. Attacks usually start after puberty, and may continue into middle age. Many women find that the problem is closely related to the menstrual cycle, and often disappears after the menopause.

The causes are complex, and may include adverse reactions to certain foods, stress and anxiety, hormone changes, the contraceptive pill, high blood pressure or problems in the neck. Naturopaths, like me, have constantly urged the holistic approach to this distressing illness, it can seldom be well treated just by medication, but needs a combination of diet, relaxation therapy, lifestyle changes, osteopathy, acupuncture, vitamins and herbal medicines. I am delighted that many doctors now realise the importance of food in relation to migraine, and there are even some hospitals using acupuncture.

Migraine is one of the most difficult conditions to treat, but over the years, I have found a number of simple things which I advise patients to do, in order to help themselves. Try them; they are safe, easy, cheap and suitable for anyone with these awful symptoms. They can all be used in conjunction with any medication prescribed by your doctor.

There are some foods which are known to be a frequent trigger of attacks. The common culprits are cheese, chocolate, red wine, sherry, port, citrus fruits, tea and coffee, but individuals may have adverse reactions to many other substances. Food additives like colourings, flavourings, preservatives and the infamous monosodium glutamate may be responsible, so avoid them.

It is important to keep a detailed diary of everything you eat and drink, and all your activities, for at least three or four weeks. Make sure that you note the time of any migraine attacks, so that you can then study the diary for any regular patterns. This helps to identify foods or activities which may be implicated. It is best to cut out the common 'trigger' foods, and any other which you suspect. Avoid long periods without food, as this leads to a drop in the sugar levels in your blood, and can be a frequent cause of the headaches.

Do increase the amount of fluid that you drink, aim at three pints a day, as this helps to trigger the body's own elimination mechanism, and prevents the fluid retention which is often involved in the cause of migraine. At the very first

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sign of an attack, drink three large glasses of cold water, as this can sometimes be enough to stop the migraine before it develops.

Learn to do some simple neck and shoulder exercises - rolling the head in gentle circles, turning from side to side, dropping it gently forward onto the chest, then pushing it back as far as it will go, raising the shoulders and letting them drop, rotating the shoulders both forwards and backwards. Use some of the simple relaxation techniques - yoga, meditation, stretching exercises - there are lots of good books on this area.

If you have an attack, put a hot compress on the nape of your neck, and a cold one on your forehead, lie down in a dark room, with a small pillow or rolled up towel under your neck, and massage some lavender oil into your temples.

The herb, Feverfew, is one of the oldest of all remedies for this condition. You can grow it and eat one large or two to three small leaves daily. It is best to put it into a sandwich, as it may cause mouth ulcers. Ginkgo biloba is an ancient herb which is known to improve the circulation, especially to the brain. Available as tablets it's certainly worth trying for a couple of months - it'll help your memory anyway. Add a B complex vitamin pill, lots of water and change your diet - you could be turning over a new leaf.

See your doctor:

- If headaches start suddenly and there is a rash, vomiting, high temperature or stiff neck. This is especially important with children.
- If the pattern of your regular headaches changes, or the pain is different.
- When ordinary pain killers don't help and the pain is severe.
- If your attacks come more often, are more severe or last longer.
- If your speech, memory or vision, deteriorate, your sight or balance are affected, you start to pass out during attacks, you get thin or experience muscle weakness.
- If you wake with headaches which are made worse when you cough, sneeze or strain.