The Migraine Trigger That’s Right Under Your Nose

by BARBARA LEECH

Is the Cause of Your Migraine Perfume?

A cause of your migraine could be right under your nose.

That’s right, certain perfumes can trigger a major migraine attack. It took me a while to make the correlation between spraying on my favorite scent and the killer headache that would soon follow. I blamed stress, work, the lights in the office, or what I ate that morning, but after a while I noticed it was only on the days I wore perfume.

The funny thing is, once upon a time, I was a district sales manager with a company that sold a full line of perfumes and every quarter they introduced a new scent. This is when my migraines first surfaced and I never made the connection at that time.

I would get cases of the new product and hold meetings to encourage the sales force to test away and then go forth and sell the product. The entire conference room would be filled with a fog heavy with the new fragrance, and I would leave with a killer migraine burgeoning.

I thought it was the stress of public speaking and worry that the sales force might not meet the company’s required sales projections. I always blamed stress or allergies — not the fragrant little bottle right under my nose.

The Facts About Scent

Migraines can cause an increased sensitivity to light, sound, sudden movements and yes, even scents. Perfume is actually listed as a “controllable trigger of migraine” by the Mayo Clinic. I wish I knew that back when I was exposing myself to perfumes on a regular basis.

Researchers have found that any scent, good or bad, food or cleaning product, can trigger a migraine headache in those people already prone to them. Typically, it is an unusual smell or a very intense fragrance — like you would find with perfume or things like bleach, paint thinner or secondhand smoke — that will act as a migraine trigger.

But How Do Perfumes Act as a Trigger?

What happens within the body to make those beautiful, sweet smelling fragrances inflict us with so much pain and trouble?

Research is still developing on this one, but the theory is that as perfumes and fragrances are so overused and omnipresent — in detergents, soaps, lotions and shampoos, for example — and based more on chemical compounds than on anything natural. Because of this, they are believed to be causing more health problems, including migraines.

In other words, it is not which fragrance you choose to wear, but mostly the chemical construction of it that is causing you the problem. And the more constant, increased exposure to such a scent, the greater the chances that it can lead to a pretty intense migraine. Once a migraine is triggered by your perfume or any other smell you encounter, it will develop pretty much the same as a migraine triggered in any other way.

How Do You Know Which Scent Is to Blame?

One of the best ways to narrow down what is causing your migraines, regardless of the trigger, is to keep a daily migraine diary. Every time you experience a migraine, make note the key information, like the time of day it begins, day of the week, the activities you did that day, and how long you suffered from it.

Next page: how to avoid fragrance triggers

How Do You Know Which Scent Is to Blame?

Record the food and drink you had over the previous 24 hours before the migraine attack hit, as well as any other possible triggers, like exposure to perfumes or other smells. Record the level of pain your felt, any differences in the sensation of pain or location that you felt it, and the relief measures you tried, such as pain relievers or homeopathic remedies. Wrap up the entry with whether or not the pain relief methods were effective, and to what degree.

Take this information with you to your doctor, who can help you identify the possible triggers and recommend treatment to ease or reduce your migraines. If perfume is expected as a possible trigger, lifestyle changes may be the first treatment a doctor recommends.

Your doctor may tell you to stop wearing perfume or using perfumed deodorants or detergents. They may also suggest you ask any co-workers or friends who wear a perfume that triggers your migraines to stop wearing it when you're around.

Avoiding Other People's Fragrances

We really have no control over other people’s fragrances, and I swear some people are very poor at gauging the amount they should use. The only solution if the perfumes from people around you are too strong — and you don’t feel comfortable asking them not to wear perfume — is to avoid being in their vicinity.

For example:

- You get in an elevator every day to head up to your office. Just about every morning there is a strong perfumed scent from a fellow rider that overwhelms you and often a migraine emerges by lunch time. The solution is take the stairs.
- A co-worker typically smells so strongly of perfume you can taste it. Do not sit near this person at the next staff meeting and try to avoid having to be in any close quarters at the same time. However, if he or she works in the next cubicle, you may have to speak up about the issue.
- Avoid the perfume counter area in department stores because they are often spraying several brands into the air at the same time. Some stores (the big name, teen clothing variety) actually have their signature scent sprayed through the air ducts. Avoid these stores, their perfumed air and their loud techno dance music at all costs — even if you are at the mall with your teen.
- If you go to church, sit in the back so you are not surrounded by scents and get up and stand in the back if you find you are still sitting in a fog of scent.

In addition to reducing attacks through lifestyle changes, two types of medication are available for perfume-triggered and other migraines. Over-the-counter acute medications can stop a migraine that's in progress; if they don't work, ask your doctor about prescription drug possibilities.

In many instances preventive medicines that you take daily can actually help stop migraines before they begin. They nip it in the bud, so to speak. So consider asking your doctor about prevention drugs (some beta blockers and anticonvulsants may help) if you suffer from regularly-occurring debilitating migraines that cause you to miss work or regular daily activities or if your migraines do not seem to respond to your current medication or pain relievers.