Can Aged Cheese Cause a Migraine?

by ANGELA FINLAY

The Link Between Cheese and Migraines

So many foods can seem perfectly benign until a migraine causes problems. Once you have experienced the throbbing, pounding, eye-aching pain of a migraine, you will likely look at your daily menu a bit differently. After all, what you consume will directly affect every process in your body. But can cheese cause migraines?

Cheese has long been considered a problem food for migraine sufferers, and while there is good reasoning behind this, the issue is not as clear and simple as you might imagine. It comes down to the type of cheese, and certain characteristics of the aging process.

The good news is that you won't necessarily need to cut out cheese altogether, but you may need to be more careful. You'll want to know which cheeses are safe to eat and which are not, why they cause problems and what that means for the rest of your diet and your migraine management plan.

Pinpointing Problem Ingredients: Can Cheese Cause Migraines?

Unless you are lactose intolerant or have a dairy allergy, it is not the milk in cheese that will cause you problems. Instead, your cheese-related migraine comes down to a couple of compounds known as vasodilators, which dilate the blood vessels in your brain.

Amines

Most experts point to tyramine as the major culprit behind cheese-triggered migraines. Tyramine is an amino acid belonging to a family of compounds called amines. Amines cause blood vessels to constrict, then dilate, and if you are vulnerable to migraines, this constriction and dilation can lead straight to a pounding headache.

Tyramine develops in food as it ages or ferments. Different cheeses contain different amounts of the troublesome compound, and it can be difficult to measure each precisely. Alcohol and chocolate are also loaded with amines, so you will want to keep them out of your diet too.

Nitrates

Like amines, nitrates cause your blood vessels to dilate, which can bring on a migraine. The term 'hot dog headaches' has been used to describe the aftermath of eating processed meats treated with nitrates. Although nitrates occur naturally in a variety of foods, the amount in processed, smoked or preserved foods is much higher and problematic for migraine sufferers.

Cured meats are the biggest offenders when it comes to nitrates, but smoked (or otherwise enhanced) cheeses are not far behind. Get in the habit of reading ingredient labels closely to make sure there are no additives that could cause problems.

Which Cheeses Are Safe to Eat?

Can cheese cause migraines? Yes, but there are some safer options. Since cheese develops tyramine during the aging process and nitrates are used as a preservative, fresh or young cheese is generally safe to eat. Here are some good choices:

- Cottage cheese.
- Cream cheese.
- Ricotta.
- Mascarpone.
- Soft goat cheese.
- Fresh or stringy mozzarella.

Which Cheeses Should You Avoid?

Some of the worst choices are cheeses that sit on the shelf for a long time to develop their earthy, pungent, or sharp tones. Most are easy to spot from smell and taste alone (think blue, parmesan and gruyere), but other offenders are better at hiding behind their creamy texture and mild taste. Some less obvious tyramine-heavy cheeses include:

- Cheddar.
- Hard goat cheese.
- Brie.
- Camembert.
- Gouda.

If you are taking a monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI) to manage your migraines, you may need to be even more cautious with cheese because you will be even more sensitive to tyramine. In this case, stick with fresh, pasteurized cheeses, or opt for soy-based cheese substitutes. Additionally, you may want to avoid leftovers completely — the longer any food is stored, the more tyramine will build up.

Finding Your Threshold

Different migraine sufferers certainly have different sets of triggers, so your headaches may not comply with predictable patterns. If you are not sure which cheese (or any other food, for that matter) you can handle without a headache, the best thing you can do is start your own food journal to track exactly what causes you pain.

It’s important to be detailed when it comes to your meals, but instead of focusing on each individual trigger, pay attention to when and where they overlap — it is useful to know how many triggers are needed to start the migraine. Record things like:

- What you eat at every meal.
- When you eat every meal.
- Supplements taken.
- Sleep quality and patterns.
- Exercise.
- Changes in your social situation or immediate environment.

The better you understand all the ways your daily life could interfere with your migraines, the easier you can change your routine for the better. Experts insist the eight hours leading up to a migraine attack are particularly important, since this is when various triggers can begin to add up. Get in the habit of taking notes throughout each day, regardless of your physical state.

Keep in mind migraine triggers can also change over time, so be wary of new symptoms or changes in your lifestyle. New injuries could also increase headache frequency, so it is important to mention any problems to your

doctor and get the treatment you need.