Can Sex Help Ease a Migraine?

by BARBARA LEECH

Sex and Migraines: How Intimacy Can Hurt — and Actually Help — Migraines

“Not tonight, I have a headache” may seem like an excuse, but for those with a migraine, it is a frequent reason intimacy is avoided. But, research indicates that reaching for your partner instead of your medication may be more effective in relieving migraine pain.

There are several reasons sex just doesn’t easily happen when someone has a migraine. First, and foremost, migraines are excruciating. You feel like your head is ready to split open, and sometimes the pain is so bad you can’t even hold down food. Not sexy.

Simply put, nobody feels attractive, sexy or passionate when in that much pain.

Second, migraine pain can be intensified by any outside stimulation; visual, audible or physical — basically, you just want to be left alone. As a sufferer, I often try to shut out the world as much as possible when a migraine hits.

All of this avoidance and pain can affect your relationships, especially sexual ones. But studies indicate that reacting the opposite way — reaching for physical contact — may actually help migraine pain.

According to a study published in the journal *Cephalalgia*, sex has been found to help relieve pain from migraines and cluster headaches.

The Research

The study surveyed 800 migraine patients and 200 patients who suffer from cluster headaches, a rare condition that affects about one percent of the population and consists of sudden, intensely painful headaches.

Led by researchers from the University of Munster in Germany, each participant was asked about whether or not sex had an impact on the intensity of their pain.

Here are the results:

- Sixty percent of migraine patients said that having sex helped reduce their migraine pain — especially good news for women, since about 70 percent of migraine sufferers across the world are female.
- As for those with cluster headaches, 37 percent of those who responded noted an improvement in their symptoms after having sex.

According to the study, the relief is in the orgasm, not the way that it is achieved. Forty-three percent of migraine patients said that the improvement occurred right after orgasm or during it.

Why Does Sex Help?

Researchers don’t know exactly why sex helps to relieve a headache or a migraine. A possible explanation is that there are natural chemicals released in the body during sex — like dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin.

These induce both pleasure-enhancing and pain-relieving sensations, according to Donald Penzien, director of the Head and Pain Clinic at the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

Endorphins act like opiate-related chemicals, and are associated with a happy, positive feeling and preventing pain messages from reaching the brain. Unlike pain medications, which can take up to 15 minutes to work, these natural body chemicals work instantly, easing a migraine before it has a chance to fully develop.

Sex Can Sometimes Make Migraines Worse

Sometimes sex, like exercise and migraines, simply makes an attack more painful. The reason is that for some sufferers, any physical activity can actually trigger or worsen the pain.

The exertion puts pressure on both the back and the neck, which can provoke a migraine in people prone to headaches.

This is not the case for all who suffer, but it should be noted as a possibility.

How Do I Get “In the Mood?”

Migraines affect many of our relationships, especially with our significant other, which is the most at risk when a partner does not understand or sympathize with your pain. It is hard to feel passionate about someone who makes light of your struggle.

Also, being in pain affects you, your mood and personality. It can make you snippy and abrupt and even quick to anger.

Migraines can impact your normal level of patience and is usually not great for your sense of humor. In fairness, your spouse or loved one has to deal with this other version of you and it can be hard on the relationship and on intimacy.

So, if migraines are striking often, this can really impact your sex life and desire. Pain does not breed passion, and often a partner may feel lonely and discarded because of numerous nights of migraine pain have interrupted typical displays of affection.

In fact, studies show that 68 percent say migraine pain disrupts their sex life. So what can you do?

- **Show gratitude.** If you partner is supportive during a migraine, let them know how much you appreciate them and all they do. Feeling appreciated can make all the difference in a partnership.
- **Ask for a neck rub.** Sometimes a massage can help ease the pain and get you in the mood for intimacy.
- **Communicate as much as possible.** Talk about you feelings as much as you can. Talk about each other’s needs. Knowing exactly what your partner is struggling with stops the guessing game and decreases misunderstandings.
- **Don’t blame yourself.** You are not responsible for having migraines. They happen to you, you did not choose them. Let go of the guilt.

Having migraines impacts your relationships as well as your life. Talk about the impact and try and express concerns, needs and gratitude. This supports a more passionate relationship.

Also, consider sex as a possible way to relieve your migraine pain, particularly if you have never tried it. If it works for you, migraine could actually improve your intimacy level, rather than continue to squelch it.