Can an Anti-Inflammatory Diet Help With Migraine?

by KRYSTINA OSTERMEYER

Anti-Inflammatory Diet for Migraine

I am 31 years old and have been suffering from migraines since I was 12 years old. This means I have been suffering from migraines for about two-thirds of my life. When I put it into a numerical context, it astounds me that for most of my life I have suffered from chronic pain. I have been on a variety of different medications over the past 19 years. I am still on a handful of medications. I see my family doctor, a neurologist, a chiropractor and a massage therapist. Still, my migraines do not seem to get better. However, I might need to consider an anti-inflammatory diet for migraine.

About two months ago, I was literally crying in my family doctor's office. "I don't know what else to do. I can't keep doing this."

"Well, there's a new integrative medicine doctor in the area. Let's try sending you there."

Oh joy. Another doctor. So, off I went. But this time, she actually had something new for me to try.

The Anti-Inflammatory Diet

After the doctor took a full health history, she looked me square in the eye.

"Look, I'm going to tell you something you don't want to hear. Migraines are multifactorial and there's probably any number of things causing them in you right now, but there's something big I can see that is probably contributing. Your diet sucks. You are a tiny ball of inflammation."

She went on to explain that this inflammation is not the external type of inflammation that you see, such as when you sprain an ankle or burn yourself on a hot stove, but the internal kind that you cannot see that can cause disease.

According to the creator of the anti-inflammatory diet, Dr. Weil, "Whole-body inflammation refers to chronic, imperceptible, low-level inflammation. Mounting evidence suggests that, over time, this kind of inflammation sets the foundation for many serious, age-related diseases including heart disease, cancer and neurodegenerative conditions, such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases.

"Diet has a huge impact, so much so that I believe that most people in our part of the world go through life in a pro-inflammatory state as a result of what they eat. I'm convinced that the single most important thing you can do to counter chronic inflammation is to stop eating refined, processed, and manufactured foods."

So where does the anti-inflammatory diet for migraine come in? According to the doctor, the way I had been eating was causing internal inflammation. This internal inflammation was most likely contributing to my migraines. Changing the way I eat could decrease the severity and the number of migraines I endured, possibly even the

amount of medication required to treat my migraines.

Anti-Inflammatory Diet Guidelines

Dr. Weil is quick to point out that the word diet is used, but it is not necessarily a weight loss gimmick. However, people can and do lose weight following the guidelines.

As a chronic dieter, I read this and thought, “Bummer.” But then I remembered: I have bigger goals at hand. If I lose weight, great, if not, at least my migraines will get better. Then I read the guidelines of this diet (like what to eat and what not to eat) and thought, “Hey, I can handle this!”

Dr. Weil does give specific guidelines regarding the amount of calories and grams of fat, carbohydrates, and protein. I try not to bog myself down with specifics because that takes a mathematical genius, or someone who is a calorie counter, of which I am neither.

However, general guidelines are as follows (and they are tasty):

- Minimize processed foods and include mostly fresh foods.
- Increase whole grain products and decrease whole wheat flour products.
- Eat a plentiful amount of beans, squash and sweet potatoes.
- Choose extra virgin olive oil or canola oil instead of other cooking oils.
- Include avocados and quality nuts, including nut butters.
- Omega-3 fatty acids are important, so include fish in the diet, as well as eggs. Include a supplement if this is not possible.
- Decrease animal proteins and increase cheese, yogurt and vegetable protein.
- Fiber intake is important. When choosing cereals, pick a cereal with 4 to 5 grams of fiber per serving.
- Fruits and vegetables should be selected from all parts of the color spectrum to protect against age-related diseases.
- Choose tea instead of coffee.
- Drink red wine moderately.
- Drink water throughout the day.

My Results

I’d be lying if I said I follow this beautiful anti-inflammatory diet for migraine all of the time. I have a 3-year-old at home who is very picky. I have a 35-year-old husband who eats like a 3-year-old. We have pizza every Thursday night and we get donuts and croissants every Saturday morning.

With that being said, I try to adopt an 80/20 mentality. I try to follow these guidelines 80% of the time, while eating what I want (the pizza and croissants) 20% of the time. Sometimes these percentages are flip-flopped.

I can tell you this – this food is good. When I am eating this diet, I also feel good. I have not followed it strictly enough to say if it reduces my headaches significantly. I will report back in a month to let you know my progress! Until next time, fellow migraineurs!

The Anti-Inflammatory Diet and Migraines: Follow-Up

Last month, I wrote about the anti-inflammatory diet and its benefit for migraines. At that time, I had been prescribed this diet by an integrative medicine doctor.

I had since adopted an 80/20 mentality when it came to this diet, meaning that I attempted to follow the diet guidelines at least 80% of the time while eating what I wanted the remaining 20% of the time (mainly pizza on Thursdays and croissants on Saturday mornings with my family.)

So, how am I doing? Happily, I have great news to report!

My Headaches

As you may recall, I am 31 years old and have been getting migraines and tension headaches since I was 12 years old. I have tried nearly every type of medication available for migraines, as well as massage with craniosacral therapy, yoga and chiropractic care. I even recently started acupuncture. Most of these things work – to some degree. I find that medication works, but eventually, the effectiveness wears off. Massage works, but I need to get a massage at least monthly. Yoga works to reduce my anxiety. You get the picture. Which is why, after about 20 years, I am still suffering from chronic headaches.

The Magic

So you can bet when this doctor asked me to readjust my diet to fix my problems, I was skeptical. What could changing my diet do that taking a medication couldn't? As it turns out – a lot.

I swapped out my morning bagel and cream cheese for a couple of eggs topped with half a mashed avocado and salsa and a side of berries. Lunch is often a salad or a sandwich on sprouted grain bread, topped with tuna and hummus, paired with a banana or an apple. Dinner is frequently a chicken breast with some type of vegetable and perhaps some brown rice or sweet potatoes. Snacks (because let's get real – I'm a snacker) are Greek yogurt with honey and berries, fruit and peanut butter and occasionally cheese sticks.

My vice? Coffee. I have not been unable to swap out coffee for tea (although I may have a cup of tea mid-afternoon instead of the third cup of joe). I have cut out the sugar that I add to my coffee though! Baby steps.

This is not that hard because the food is good and I do not restrict myself. The important thing that I keep in mind is that this is not something that I need to do all the time. In fact, I eat cake on birthdays. If I want dessert at a restaurant, I order it. And beer? Yes, I still drink it because I do not love red wine (in fact, I am likely to have an anaphylactic reaction if I drink it).

It Works

How do I know it works for me? After all, if you are like me, your headaches probably ebb and flow – sometimes they are awful and sometimes, well, you may not have a headache for a while.

Here's how I now that the anti-inflammatory diet works. I could tell after going camping one time. To save money on our trip, I bought bread that I do not usually eat, lunch meat that is full of nitrates and hot dogs. I drank beer daily. I ate the best scone of my life at a local bakery. I did not drink enough water so I could avoid the outhouse. All of these little things may not be a big issue, except they culminated together into one weekend. I ended up with one of the worst headaches I have had in months. Then, I was in damage control mode, picking up the pieces of that one little weekend.

The Takeaway

I cannot vouch for everyone, but if you suffer from migraine (or any chronic pain disorder), I strongly advocate that you try the anti-inflammatory diet.

Speak to your physician, and if they give you the go-ahead, you have got nothing to lose – except maybe, your pain.