10 Common Migraine Triggers to Be Aware Of

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Identifying and Coping With Migraine Triggers

With an introduction from Amy.

Migraines can take away from your quality of life and leave you immobile for hours, or in some cases even days. When you have migraines attacks, you never know when one can strike, right? Actually, not so much. While it may seem your migraine came out of nowhere, according to experts migraines actually occur from what is known as a trigger.

Migraine triggers come in the form of foods, scents, certain lighting, weather changes, and some environmental factors that you're exposed to. By learning more about the different types of migraine triggers and how you can prevent them from causing a migraine attack, you can reduce the number of migraines you experience and improve your quality of life.

Here are ten common migraine triggers to be aware of:

1. Diet

What you eat can have a huge impact on the frequency and severity of migraine attacks. Some of the most common culprits when it comes to migraine food triggers are artificial sweeteners, monosodium glutamate (MSG), preservatives, processed foods, dairy, and gluten.

Artificial Sweeteners

Artificial sweeteners, or sugar substitutes, are food additives that are synthetic, and which provide a sugar-like taste. They contain excitotoxins which affect the neurological system. The most commonly used sugar substitutes that are not produced by nature are:

- Aspartame
- Sucralose
- Saccharine
- Xylitol
- Sorbitol
- Acesulfame k

MSG

Monosodium glutamate, also known as sodium glutamate, is used as a flavor enhancer. It is a non-essential amino acid and one of the most abundantly occurring ones.

MSG is found naturally in cheese, tomatoes and other foods. When used to enhance flavor, it intensifies the flavor of the food it is used in, giving it an umami taste.

It is believed that MSG, a known excitotoxin, causes severe neurological disorders including migraine and seizures. Glutamate is a known to be a part of the pathophysiology of migraine or migraine pathway.

Preservatives

Preservatives are used to help keep food stay fresher and last longer. The most common preservatives used are sulfites, nitrites and nitrates. Foods these are found in include:

Sulfites

- Dried fruit
- White wine
- Red wine

Nitrites/Nitrates

- Preserved/smoked meats
- Canned foods
- Pickled foods

Dairy

Casein and choline are milk proteins that are very common triggers for migraine. Casein is found in milk products where choline is present in sour cream and whole milk. Milk products may also contain large amounts of free glutamic acid, which is also a migraine trigger.

Gluten

Grains, such as barley, rye and wheat, contain a protein called gluten. Gluten can cause inflammation, bloating, diarrhea and weight loss. It can also affect the nervous system, which means it can cause headaches or migraine in people who do not have celiac disease. Having a sensitivity to gluten means that you may also experience:

- Brain fog
- Fatigue
- Joint pain
- Abdominal pain

Hidden Migraine Food Triggers

There are other food triggers that most people are not aware of. These include dietary histamine, tyramine, and phenylethylamine.

With histamine, allergies come to mind. Histamine is also a component of digestion. A buildup of histamine in the body can cause you to feel flushed, itchy and have headaches.

Tyramine and phenylethylamine are found in the most common food triggers. Tyramine is a product of the decarboxylation of tyrosine during fermentation or decay.

Phenylethylamine, which is an organic compound, acts as a nervous system stimulant.

Dietary Histamine

- Alcoholic beverages
- Aged cheeses
- Fermented foods
- Cured meats
- Citrus fruits
- Nuts
- Smoked fish

Tyramine

- Potentially spoiled meat
- Pickled meat
- Smoked meat
- Fermented meat
- Marinated meat (fish, poultry, and beef)
- Most pork, except cured ham

Phenylethylamine

- Chocolate
- Beans, nuts, seeds
- Meat, seafood, poultry
- Raw eggs
- Sheep’s milk
- Goat milk
- Soy milk
- Whole milk

Next page: More common migraine triggers including stress, weather, hormones, sleep, and more.

2. Stress

Stress may be one of the biggest triggers when it comes to a migraine. The level of stress you experience daily can have a huge impact on how often you experience migraine. Sources of stress may include:

- Emotional
- Financial
- Work-related
- Family situations

3. Weather

Fluctuations in barometric pressure, increase in storm activity, high humidity and temperatures, and changes in weather patterns can all attribute to triggering a migraine.

4. Hormones

Changes in estrogen and progesterone levels during menstrual cycles can trigger migraine. Commonly known as a menstrual migraine, up to 75 percent of women say they experience migraine attacks around their menstrual cycle.

5. Sleep

Disruptions in your sleep pattern can trigger a migraine. Not getting enough sleep or getting too much can affect how often a migraine attack can happen. Poor sleep hygiene includes falling asleep with the television on or using your phone right before bedtime and not having a set time you get some shut-eye.

6. Caffeine and Alcohol

Caffeinated beverages such as soda, tea, and coffee are triggers for some people with migraine. Caffeine is a popular ingredient in several over-the-counter medications because it can stop or abort a migraine for those whom caffeine is not a trigger.

Red wine seems to be a major culprit when it comes to alcoholic triggers but is not the only one to avoid. Other alcoholic beverages, including white wine, beer, champagne, and liquor are also triggers.

7. Light

Sunlight, fluorescent lighting, and the backlight from televisions, mobile devices, and computer screens are all common light triggers. One of the classic symptoms of migraine is photophobia, or sensitivity to light.

The glare and wavelengths emitted from these light sources cause feelings of lightheadedness, dizziness, pain behind the eyes and nausea.

8. Smell

Strong odors are one of the most harmful triggers. The intense smell can cause an immediate migraine attack. Sometimes, coming into contact with strong odors such as these is unavoidable:

- Chemicals
- Harsh cleansers
- Perfume, cologne, and aftershave

- Body washes, lotions, and sprays
- Cigarette, cigar and pipe smoke
- Car exhaust

9. Dehydration

Dehydration, or not getting enough water intake, can bring on a migraine attack. The effects of dehydration on the body include confusion and dizziness and can lead to more serious medical issues.

10. Medication Overuse Headache

Formerly known as a rebound headache, medication overuse headache (MOH) is a result of taking over-the-counter or prescription pain medication more frequently than three times a week to abort a migraine. MOH is a new type of headache that pre-exists with or worsens the primary headache.

Coping With and Managing Migraine Triggers

Not all triggers can be prevented but they can be effectively managed to where their impact on how often you have a migraine attack can be reduced. Trigger management is a key component in managing migraine. Learning what your specific migraine triggers are and the most effective ways to cope with migraines will help you be healthier.

Pinpoint Your Food Migraine Triggers

Keeping a headache journal is a great way to start identifying what your food triggers may be. At the onset of a migraine, record what you ate right before it started. You may start to notice a pattern if a specific food or beverage was ingested before an attack began.

Elimination diets also help to weed out food triggers. Removing common food triggers from your diet and then slowly reintroducing them can help you figure out if they indeed trigger migraines for you.

It may seem difficult at first to give up some foods you love if they are migraine triggers, but in the long run, you and your head will be better for it.

Next page: More tips for coping with and managing common migraine triggers.

Coping With and Managing Migraine Triggers

Reduce and Manage Stress

Learning how to manage stress in a healthy way is important in lowering the risk of stress-induced migraine attacks. Meditation, relaxation, guided imagery, yoga, tai chi, and cognitive behavioral therapy are all effective ways to cope with stress.

Coping With Weather Changes and Migraines

The force of mother nature cannot be controlled. Weather is the most challenging trigger to cope with. It is unpredictable and relentless at times but there are ways to work around or with it.

During heat waves, try to stay indoors in the air conditioning. If you have to venture outside, wear wide-brimmed hats, eye protection and always stay hydrated. If fluctuations in barometric pressure are a trigger, you can purchase, and wear earplugs made specifically to counteract those changes.

Hormones

If you experience menstrual migraines, changes in lifestyle and diet can help. Some methods of birth control can help regulate hormone levels as well. Consult with your physician to figure out what the appropriate treatment plan for you should be.

Get Adequate Sleep

Having a proper sleep hygiene will help with sleep-related migraine attacks. Here are a few ways to enforce good sleep hygiene:

- Keep a strict sleep schedule. Plan to go to bed at the same time every night.
- Turn off the television and put away your mobile devices thirty minutes before turning in for the night. The blue light emitted from the screens keep the brain stimulated, so shutting them down will help the brain know it's time to relax.
- Reading before bed, meditating and using guided imagery also helps you wind down and get ready to sleep.
- Try to avoid taking naps during the day or exercising before bed as they can disrupt your sleep.

Reduce Caffeine and Alcohol Intake

If caffeine is a migraine trigger for you, avoid caffeinated beverages such as coffee, black tea, and soda. Instead, opt for decaffeinated coffee or soda and green tea.

Drink caffeinated drinks in moderation if you must have it. Avoid alcoholic beverages that you know are triggers for you and limit how much you have.

Wear Tinted Eyewear for Light Sensitivity

Light sensitivity can be managed through wearing precision tinted eyewear. These products use a specific lens that filters out harmful and painful wavelengths of sunlight and fluorescent lighting. Light filters can also be purchased and installed over existing fluorescent lighting in offices and homes.

Tips for Dealing With Smell-Induced Migraines

We can't always avoid walking into or through a smelly area. Waiting rooms, elevators and other small spaces can be filled with someone's strong perfume or cologne. Walking into a building could mean going through a cloud of cigarette smoke first. How can you control something so pervasive?

- Request that your coworkers do not wear any perfume, cologne, aftershave or scented lotions in the office.
- You can extend this request to your physician's office as well so the waiting room and time with the nurse don't trigger a migraine for you.
- Put a drop or two of your favorite essential oil on a scarf, tissue or piece of cotton and smell that to block out the harsh odors around you.
- If you will be in an area where harsh chemicals are being used, such as paint or cleansers, wear a mask that filters out those fumes.

Keep Hydrated

Staying hydrated can alleviate and inhibit a lot of medical issues, including migraines and headaches. Drink your body weight of water in ounces each day to avoid dehydration. If you weigh 120 pounds you should be drinking 120 oz. of water each day.

Stop Overusing Migraine Medications

Regular use of acute headache medication can result in medication overuse headache. Usually, medication

overuse headache can be resolved when overuse is stopped, but not always. Consult with your physician on the best treatment options for you.