Can a Ketogenic Diet Help Migraines?

by KRYSTINA OSTERMEYER

The Ketogenic Diet and Migraines: Can a New Diet Help?

Show of hands.

Who HAS NOT heard of the ketogenic diet these days?

Crickets from the audience, am I right?

That's because the ketogenic diet has been quite the buzzword over the past couple years. As a certified diabetes educator, my first thought of "ketones" has nothing to do with a ketogenic diet, so I decided to experiment with Google.

I began to type in "ketone" – and when I got to "keto" the first three items that popped up were "ketogenic meal plans," "ketogenic diet," and "keto diet."

You could have knocked me over with a feather!

Ketogenic Diet History

While it seems like everyone and their mother is on the ketogenic diet to lose weight, the ketogenic diet has been around for almost 100 years. And its origins have *nothing to do with weight loss.*

The ketogenic diet was created by Dr. Russell Wilder at Mayo Clinic in 1924. It was initially created to treat epilepsy – and it was found to be highly effective. In the 1940s, anti-seizure medications were created, and the ketogenic diet largely fell to the wayside.

In the 1990s, the ketogenic diet reemerged after Charlie Abraham, an epileptic toddler, tried and failed all available seizure medications. He even endured a brain surgery, which proved ineffective. After being on the ketogenic diet for five years, he became seizure-free and is still seizure-free to this day.

What Does the Ketogenic Diet Do?

The diet consists of foods that are rich in fats, moderate in protein, and low in carbohydrates. This particular combination allows the body to use energy differently. Typically, we use carbohydrates for energy. Instead, we're able to use fat.

When we have low carbohydrate intake, our bodies must turn to an alternate energy source. It begins to use fat. The fat is broken down into fatty acids and ketones. As the ketones build up, the body enters ketosis – and ketosis leads to a reduction in epileptic seizures.

And… What About Migraines?

You may be wondering, “Well, what the heck does this have to do with migraines?”

Well, hear me out.

As a fellow migraineur, I came across the ketogenic diet on a Facebook forum. Many of the members were using the ketogenic diet to treat their migraines. I had, like everyone else, heard of the ketogenic diet for weight loss, but wondered if it could help me, too.

So, like any good little nurse and chronic disease sufferer, I researched the heck out of this diet, and how it could help my condition.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t find *any* legit research studies using human subjects that proved that using a ketogenic diet was effective in treating migraines.

Marcelo Campos, MD, of Harvard Health Blog, writes, “Because of these neuroprotective effects, questions have been raised about the possible benefits for other brain disorders such as Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, multiple sclerosis, sleep disorders, autism, and even brain cancer. However, there are no human studies to support recommending ketosis to treat these conditions.”

However, Dr. Campos goes on to say, “A ketogenic diet could be an interesting alternative to treat certain conditions, and may accelerate weight loss.”

He does note that it can be very difficult to follow for some people because it can be very restrictive, and also points out that we don’t know a lot about its long-term effects – primarily for the reason that most people have a difficult time sticking to the diet long-term.

My Personal Experience

I decided to try the ketogenic diet for myself. Here’s my personal experience.

Should you try this diet, it is imperative that you research the diet extensively. This diet is not one that you can do without meal planning. There are lots of “rules,” and if you do not plan what you will have for all meals, you will most likely fail.

Have you heard of “keto flu?” It is a real thing if you embark on this diet. Supposedly, the keto flu lasts for the first few days while the body learns how to burn ketones instead of glucose. Symptoms include headaches (yes – just want I wanted!), nausea, brain fog, fatigue, and sleepiness.

I did power through the keto flu, but my headaches did not improve. Granted, I lasted only two weeks, so I am not sure if that is long enough to determine if the ketogenic diet was going to be my migraine cure.

However, my family got tired of food planning, and I couldn’t stomach the thought of cooking two separate meals, so the ketogenic diet and I had a breakup.

Who Shouldn't Use the Ketogenic Diet?

Please note that there are a number of metabolic and health conditions that are contraindicated with the ketogenic diet. It is recommended that you discuss the ketogenic diet with your physician transitioning to this way of eating.

I’d be interested in hearing if the ketogenic diet was successful for treating your migraines!