How Alcohol Can Impact, Trigger and Even Benefit Migraines

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Alcohol and Migraines

Migraines have been known to hit hard and without warning, but in many cases, a specific event or ingredient is to blame.

Migraine triggers can range widely, from environmental pollutants and food additives to stress and fatigue. While every sufferer has their own unique set of triggers, many can point to alcohol as a prime suspect behind their persistent migraine attacks.

However, there may be more to the problem than meets the eye – learn how alcohol can both harm and help migraines, depending on how you use it.

Alcohol as a Migraine Trigger

Many, if not most, migraine sufferers have problems when it comes to alcohol. For some, any type of booze will set off the first pangs of a nasty headache, while others can trace the trouble to a specific type of alcohol. One fact is certain: alcohol and migraines generally don't mix, for a few reasons.

Tyramine. A product of protein breakdown, tyramine is an amino acid that can be found in many aged foods and beverages, from cheese and cured meat to red wine, sherry and other aged alcohols. Be suspicious of any high-protein food or beverage that has been aged – the risk of a high level of tyramine is not worth the probable headache that will follow.

Preservatives. Additives and preservatives are known migraine triggers, and they're not only found in packaged foods. Sulfites are particularly bothersome for migraine sufferers, and they are almost universally used in wine. Check labels closely if you know that sulfites mess with your head.

Blood flow and by-products. When you drink alcohol, blood flow to your brain increases, which can feed the ache and pressure of a migraine. But your metabolism may be to blame, too: as your body breaks down and uses the energy in alcohol, it creates certain by-products that could trigger a migraine.

Every migraine sufferer is different, but wine, whiskey and beer seem to cause the most distress. Red wine can also be extremely tannic, and although there's no firm scientific evidence behind it, many people swear these plant compounds (also found in tea, apples and cider) are terrible migraine triggers.

To Drink or Not to Drink?

It would seem that alcohol is simply a bad idea if you want to avoid migraines, but there's actually very little proof that any compound in alcohol is worse than other trigger foods. In some ways, a little bit of alcohol may even be a good idea for migraine sufferers.

Regular, low doses of alcohol can lower your risk of cardiovascular disease. Migraines (especially those with aura that hit frequently) increases your risk of developing certain cardiovascular conditions. Therefore, those who suffer from frequent migraines could benefit from a drink a day, such as a small glass of red wine (which boasts more heart-healthy compounds than other alcoholic beverages).

In many cases, it’s not the alcohol itself that triggers a migraine, but rather a combination of stress, anxiety or other intense emotions with the drinking. And in charged situations, you may find that you drink more quickly or consume more drinks in a short time, which can certainly lead to dehydration and hangover headaches in anyone.

Keep track of what you drink, when you drink it, and what food you consume along with it, in order to discover exactly how alcohol affects your migraines. You may be surprised to find some other triggers that have been hiding behind alcohol for years.