Understanding Where Migraine Nausea Comes From and How to Stop It

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The Relationship Between a Migraine and Nausea

Migraines are universally associated with pain — whether they suffer from the affliction or not, most people understand that the throbbing headache can be unbearable. But other symptoms, though nearly as prevalent, are sometimes glossed over. Migraine nausea is one of them.

If you have felt the throbbing pain and gut-wrenching discomfort at the same time, you know just how debilitating a migraine can become. In fact, the nausea can be harder to handle than the headache itself, and will almost certainly interfere with your ability to do basic daily tasks, like eating, drinking, and taking medication.

You do not need to simply suffer through the nausea and vomiting that come with an attack. Instead, turn your attention to relieving the nausea with some proven strategies, and take back some much-needed control in your battle against migraine pain.

How Common is Nausea With Migraine?

Unfortunately, migraines tend to be a full-body ailment. Throbbing head pain is the primary symptom, but many people experience pain elsewhere, along with general fatigue and more specific digestive distress. Migraine sufferers report nausea with their migraine, sometimes to the point of vomiting.

Although tension or cluster headaches could cause nausea in susceptible people, an unsettled stomach is far more common with migraine. Experts haven't been able to explain the migraine and nausea relationship completely, but many suspect that it comes down to a few elements:

Estrogen

More women than men suffer from migraines (18% and 6% of the American population, respectively), and many women find their migraines increase when their hormones are fluctuating. Doctors have long suspected that estrogen plays a role in migraine pain, and since women are also more likely to experience nausea with their migraine, it's possible that estrogen influences how the stomach responds, too.

Serotonin

Migraine pain is thought to come from enlarged blood vessels on the brain, and these blood vessels swell when serotonin levels drop. Interestingly, low serotonin is also linked to motion sickness and nausea, which means too little of this important neurotransmitter could help to trigger migraines and the nausea that comes with them.

Sympathetic Nervous System

The nerve impulses that travel from your brain to your stomach can change when the blood vessels in your brain dilate during a migraine. Not only do the nerve impulses cause pain, but they may spark a “fight or flight” response, which closes off the passage between the stomach and intestines to slow digestion. Anything left in your stomach will be trapped, and that will tend to make you feel nauseous.

Types of Migraines that Bring on Nausea

Women and people who suffer from motion sickness are more prone to nausea during migraines, but they won’t necessarily get nauseated during each and every migraine.

Textbook migraine headaches can certainly bring on nausea, but more often non-headache migraine variants will make you sick to your stomach.

- **Migraine without aura:** Migraine headaches can be broadly divided into those with aura (the vision disturbances that are precursors to the migraine) and those without. Migraines that begin without an aura – which are the most common type – more often bring nausea along with severe head pain.
- **Abdominal migraines:** Seen in children more often than adults, this peculiar form of migraine causes pain in the stomach and intestines rather than in the head. The pain usually comes with nausea and vomiting, which can last for a few hours to a few days. Children who suffer from abdominal migraines often develop the common migraine headache variant in adulthood.
- **Cyclic vomiting syndrome:** Another condition that targets children more than adults, cyclic vomiting syndrome is an unnerving cycle of nausea and vomiting that can go on for days. Cyclic vomiting syndrome and regular migraine headaches share some of the same triggers.

Vertigo and dizziness also lead to nausea, and they are both part of the long list of migraine symptoms. Since nausea can severely impact your daily life, and frequent vomiting can bring about another set of health concerns (like dehydration and damage from stomach acid), it is obvious that you need to treat your nausea as seriously as you treat your migraine pain.

Finding Migraine Nausea Relief

It’s important to manage your migraine according to the plan your doctor has prescribed, but a queasy stomach tends to interfere with that good intention. Since nausea and vomiting can prevent you from taking and absorbing oral medication, you may have to alter your treatment approach. Here are a few migraine and nausea relief options you can try:

Eliminate Stress

Stress is a terribly invasive trigger, leading to more migraines and interfering with treatment. If you can find ways to drastically reduce your everyday stress – and counteract your body’s stressful response – you may notice fewer attacks and much more manageable symptoms.

Relaxation exercises are good starting points for a less stressful life. If you are having trouble tapping into a meditative state or your approaches are losing effectiveness, consider visiting a therapist for a fresh take and some new approaches to stress management.

Try Acupuncture or Acupressure

Acupuncture has been traditionally used to stifle nausea and vomiting stemming from a number of causes. Simulating one particular acupuncture point (PC6) has helped to relieve nausea associated with chemotherapy and motion sickness, and so may help with your migraine nausea.

Acupressure is a less invasive technique that may bring comparable results. Acupressure can reduce migraines by pressing firmly on specific points to reduce nausea and vomiting significantly – research reveals that it can even replace antiemetic rescue medication.

The bonus is that you can eventually practice the pressure technique yourself, in the comfort of your own home.

Medicate Wisely

When you experience nausea without vomiting, you may find some relief with NSAIDs (such as ibuprofen), especially when taken early in the attack. A high dose can cut down the migraine pain quickly, which should help to limit or eliminate the accompanying symptoms, like nausea.

If you are not able to keep anything down, you must find another route for your medication. Taking an anti-emetic (medicine to stop the nausea and vomiting) or triptans (drugs that aim to quickly relieve the migraine itself) in suppository form can increase your chances of getting the medication into your bloodstream quickly.

In the case of severe nausea and vomiting, you may need to be admitted to the hospital: water and electrolytes can be replenished intravenously, and your health care team can make sure your body absorbs the medicine you need.

Stay a Step Ahead

If you can stop the migraine before it begins, you can sidestep the unpleasant nausea. Consider a preventative migraine management plan, focusing on staying far away from food and environmental triggers, and incorporating the right medications: some studies have found that tricyclic antidepressants can partially or fully relieve nausea and vomiting with migraine.

It’s worth revisiting your migraine management plan with your doctor from time to time, to make sure you have the best treatment combination for your symptoms.