The Connection Between Skin Sensitivity and Migraines

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Managing Migraine and Sensitive Skin

If you find that headaches make your skin tingle, ache, and scream in pain, you're suffering from a very common migraine side effect – skin sensitivity. Sure, sensitive skin may sound mild, but when you have to deal with the scratching, burning, or shooting pain that's impossible to ignore, it can add a whole new layer to your discomfort, which means a big hit to your sleep, comfort, and general quality of life.

Find out what may be causing your skin sensitivity with migraines, and how an adjustment in your treatment plan may be able to help.

The Link Between Skin Sensitivity and Migraines

The vast majority of migraine sufferers report severe, sometimes even intolerable, skin sensitivity known as "allodynia": studies show nearly 80% of patients experience extreme skin pain and discomfort in the hours after a migraine headache hits. Indeed, simply stroking the surface of the skin can feel like sandpaper, which makes activities like shaving, hair brushing, and even wearing jewelry too painful to manage.

There are still many unknowns when it comes to migraine-related pain, but the increase in skin sensitivity may be traced to a few sources:

Spinal Cord Interference

Although the blood vessels in the head could explain the throbbing pain of migraines, the spinal cord might actually be responsible for skin "hypersensitivity". One popular theory suggests that the migraine-related pain signals in the brain interact with the nerve cells in the spinal cord at base of the skull. Once these nerves are activated, even the mild rhythm of blood pumping through the blood vessels of your brain can feel like an incredible pounding all over your head.

This may help to explain the skin sensitivity around the eyes and temples, but how about skin discomfort in other regions? That radiating skin pain could be explained by a chain reaction in the nerves, where the cluster of sensitized nerves at the base of the skull go on to sensitize another set of neurons in the brain's thalamus region. This may lead the thalamus to mistakenly interpret normal signals from different parts of the body as pain signals.

Level of Neuron Activity

Some people are more likely to experience more widespread skin sensitivity than others – those who suffer from migraines every day and younger patients are especially vulnerable. One theory to explain this pattern is that heightened neuron activity eventually damages the neurons, causing a "misfire", and prolonged skin pain.

The more often you suffer from migraines, the more certain pain pathways are activated, but as you grow older,

there’s less activity in those pathways. Migraine pain tends to decrease in frequency and severity as you age, which means most people notice a decline in skin pain, too.

Next page: medication for pain control.

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Gender

More women than men suffer from migraine headaches, and more female patients experience severe skin sensitivity. Although the cause isn’t completely clear, researchers suspect that female hormones have a role to play in allodynia: activity in pain areas of the brain changes as hormones peak and dip during the menstrual cycle. Low levels of estrogen allow pain-producing neurochemicals to increase, and that results in a lower pain threshold.

Better Medication for Better Pain Control

Certain pain relievers can be very effective when it comes to throbbing head pain, but skin sensitivity persists because most migraine medication targets the wrong source of pain. Drugs tend to act on the fibers and neurons that carry the initial pain signals – the ones in the brain that trigger a migraine – rather than the affected neurons in the spinal cord.

If you’re one of the unlucky ones who suffer from skin sensitivity, you must take these medications within the first hour of a migraine attack in order to get the relief you need. If you wait much longer, they won’t stop the distorted signals from reaching the brain, and the sensitization is your spinal cord will continue.

While research continues to look for better medications to address all aspects of migraine pain, there’s currently nothing that specifically targets skin sensitivity. Your best bet is to take your prescribed medication at the first sign of an attack, and take a few precautions to relieve some of the pain:

- **Learn to detect early warning signs**. Watch out for pain on one side of your head, tunnel vision or aura, sensitivity to light or sound, blurry vision, tinging in your fingers or toes, or nausea – all these are signs that a migraine is about to strike. Yawning is another common warning sign that’s often ignored, as are food cravings and thirst, so if you notice changes in your eating or breathing habits, have your migraine medication close by to treat the episode quickly.
- **Be wary of irritants**. If showering is too painful, considering bathing in lukewarm water – a neutral temperature and buoyant water will be more comfortable for your skin. If a migraine sets in, dress in very light layers (billowy linen and lightweight cotton are good choices), and adjust the temperature in your bedroom so it’s warm enough to sleep without heavy sheets. Is your scalp too sensitive to brush and style your hair? Consider a loose braid for a neat, comfy style that will last through the day.
- **Relax naturally**. If you can take care of the primary migraine pain, you may be able to deter the spinal nerve pain that’s causing your skin sensitivity. While medication is helpful, natural stimulants can work, too: aromatherapeutic plants and oils like lavender, rosemary, peppermint, camomile, and ginger are reputed to have pain-relieving effects. However, it’s important to consult with your doctor before incorporating any complementary treatments – even natural herbs – into your headache management routine.

Skin sensitivity may be an unfortunate part of migraine pain, but take comfort in the fact that research on treatments is ongoing. In the meantime, continue to fine tune your migraine treatment plan with your doctor to make sure you have the tools to take care of your headache at the first sign of discomfort.