Preventing Migraines From Ruining Your Trip

by BARBARA LEECH

Managing Migraines on Vacation

If a travel vacation is in your future and migraines are striking on a regular basis, you are probably wondering how to prevent your headaches from ruining all your fun. Perhaps you feel guilty about letting your family down and worried about missing out, which is not what a vacation is supposed to be about.

If you are boarding a plane for your vacation, you'll face multiple migraine triggers in addition to those you deal with every day. Everything from the changes in air pressure to dehydration, time zone changes and airplane meals can play a role in triggering a headache. But flying is often part getting to a vacation destination, so what can you do?

Prepare for Take-Off

Just like a flight attendant's safety and emergency situation instructions are presented so everyone is prepared for take-off, you need to get yourself prepared for dealing with your condition while you are traveling.

Here are a few preparatory suggestions prior to departure:

Book Your Flights Non-Stop

This may seem counter-productive, allowing no break from flight and no period to get up and walk around an airport. But research says that altitude changes can trigger changes in the body's oxygen levels, which in turn cause blood vessels in the head to react by contracting and expanding. These changes in the blood vessels can trigger a migraine.

Take Snacks

Pack a few high protein snacks in your carry-on. Special K protein bars or nuts are perfect – just avoid anything with a lot of salt, which makes you retain fluids and can elevate blood pressure.

Drink Plenty of Water

Coffee tends to help dehydrate you, so limit your consumption. Soda does not rehydrate you like water and diet soda can actually be a trigger for me. Red wine is reportedly a big no-no for migraines for many sufferers. Good old H2O is your best bet.

Shut out the Light

Pack dark sunglasses or a sleeping mask to use on the plane. This can prevent an air-travel headache. Bright or flickering lights can trigger migraines and blocking out the brightness in the cabin may also help you sleep during

long flights.

Next page: things you can't control.

Prepare for Take-Off

Move Around

Be sure to get up, move around and stretch. Sitting still for long periods can result in circulation issues that can trigger a headache.

Try a Decongestant

The change in air pressure, especially as the airplane starts its descent, can affect your ears and nose and can bring on an air-travel headache. Use a decongestant if this typically happens to you, but remember to ask your doctor if it is safe to use with your migraine medication.

Remember Your Medication

Don’t forget to pack your migraine medication in your carry-on luggage, just in case you need it, and be sure to pack enough medication for the duration of your entire vacation. In other words, plan for the worst case scenario. This means planning ahead by ordering refills well in advance of your departure date, so there are no surprises like, “I thought I had more and now there is no time to get to the pharmacy.”

Your doctor can prescribe preventative medication that thwarts altitude sickness and may prevent headaches caused by it. Acetazolamide can be taken the day before the flight and again the day of the flight. You may also want to ask your doctor about a migraine medication called Sumatriptan, which can help stop an air-travel headache after it begins.

Carry Your Insurance Info

Make sure you have your health insurance card with you at all times. If your migraines might require medical treatment while traveling, this is very important. Also have a summary of your past care, so the doctor you encounter can see your medical history.

Mitigating Triggers You Can’t Control

Unfortunately there are several vacation migraine triggers that you have no way to prevent. They include:

Different Climate

Traveling to where the climate is different and temperatures are not what you are used to can trigger a migraine. Heat and humidity often set off a headache for me as well as being at a higher altitude. If I head to the mountains I stand a good chance of a headache when I first arrive.

Next page: additional factors.

Mitigating Triggers You Can’t Control

Jet Lag

Jet lag can make the average person feel tired and out of sorts. For those with migraines that fatigue can be the perfect trigger for a headache. Try to sleep on the plane if you can, and allow for a day of catching up with sleep

or a good nap. Don’t set a schedule that has you hitting the ground running.

Dietary Changes

Eating different foods on a completely different and unusual schedule can trigger a migraine. I try to keep things on a normal schedule the first day or two. Avoid trigger foods – watch for things with nitrates like hot dogs, sausages, and other processed meats.

Children

Traveling with children can be stressful and filled with little arguments and moody behavior. My kids seem to have days on vacation when they are amazing and get along perfectly and then there are days their behavior is challenging, loud and I think I will lose my mind.

I try to pack enough down-time activities that there are always quiet options to keep them busy and happy. On the plane they have a backpack of coloring books, small action figures, stickers and paper, books to read, and my husband and I bring our tablets loaded with a movie or two. Don’t forget the ear buds for personal listening.

Too Much Sun

Taking in too much sun can trigger a migraine. I also have lupus, so I must limit my UV exposure in order to prevent the other issues I suffer from, but I have read that people with migraines should limit their time in the sun, wear sunscreen, drink plenty of water and don’t overheat in order to prevent a headache from striking.

Final Thoughts

Another thing to think about that you can control is your alcohol consumption. A nice drink with an umbrella in it is symbolic of a relaxing vacation, but it can be a big trigger for migraines. Keep consumption in check, drink plenty of water to counteract dehydration, and stop at the first sign of a migraine. Moderation is key to enjoying yourself.

Finally, get plenty of fresh air and exercise throughout your vacation. Try to relax and not worry about a migraine striking. You can only do so much in preventative measures, so cut yourself some slack when it comes to worrying about it. The mission is to make the most of this time and do all you can to make sure it is migraine free, but if one strikes it is OK to take a day to rest. Let go of rigid plans and schedules and go more with how you feel each day of the vacation.

Most of all, don’t let migraines ruin your all your fun and relaxation.