Headache Sufferers' Diet

Type: Consumer

Headache Sufferer's Diet resource: Resurrection Health Care, Saint Joseph Hospital, & Diamond Headache Clinic

The first step in the nutritional management of diet-triggered headaches is eating a well-balanced diet. It is especially important to eat three meals a day with a snack at night or 6 small meals spread through out the day. You should include a good protein source at each meal/snack (i.e. milk, meat, fish) and should avoid eating high sugar foods by themselves, especially when excessively hungry. These actions will help to prevent the 'hunger headache'.

If you are taking an MAOI drug (i.e Nardil, Parmate) you need to follow a low tyramine diet.

Individual Food Sensitivities:

Headache sufferers vary in their sensitivity to specific foods. Headache reactions to foods may take anywhere from ½ hour to 72 hours to develop, making them often very difficult to pinpoint. For that reason, it is recommended that you keep a 'food diary', with columns for time, food(s) eaten and the amounts, and any headache symptoms. You should start with a conservative diet (generally, one that does not include any of the foods in the following lists). You can introduce them one 'new' food every three days and determine any patterns/changes in headache symptoms. This can be quite helpful and is well worth the time and effort.

Please be aware that headache triggers can have an additive effect. For instance, being over tired is a headache trigger for many people. So is skipping a meal. If you haven’t gotten enough sleep, then rush through the morning and skip breakfast, you will be much more likely to get a headache (and that headache will take up much more time than what you saved in the morning) than if you had missed some sleep but eaten breakfast.

For women only: Many female headache sufferers are much more sensitive to headache triggers when they are premenstrual. Foods that may not bother you the week after your period may trigger headaches the week before your period.

Possible Culprits:
Everyone is unique but there are categories of foods that are more likely to be triggers for headaches than others. They are grouped by similarities of sensitivities (for example, people who find red wine to be a headache trigger often find chocolate to also trigger headaches).

**Caffeine and Similar Compounds**

First, caffeine is a stimulant that can alter the effectiveness of many headache treatment medications. For that reason, caffeine intake should be limited and, preferably, consistent. (Please note that we are not encouraging anyone who does not use caffeine to start!) No more than a 2 serving equivalent of caffeine should be consumed per day (total of <200 mg. caffeine per day). Please see the end of this guide for caffeine content of common sources. Because chocolate (except white chocolate) contains caffeine and other chemicals that mimic caffeine's effects, one serving (1/2 oz. chocolate equivalent) counts as one serving of caffeine.

Secondly, abrupt discontinuance of caffeine can cause caffeine-withdrawal headaches. In some individual Sunday morning headaches may be caused by sleeping later than the time of the usual morning cup of coffee or tea. Others may even wake up in the middle of the night with a caffeine-withdrawal headache because of the drop off in blood levels after consuming caffeine virtually all day long. There is a lot of individual variation in sensitivity and some people do best completely avoiding caffeine.

**Food Temperatures**

Consuming extremely hot or cold foods triggers headaches in some individuals (i.e. the "ice-cream headache"). You may need to eat these foods slowly or avoid extremes of food temperatures entirely.

**Tyramine Sensitivity**

Tyramine is a natural product of protein breakdown. Its content in food increases as food, especially high protein foods, age. Because it is a naturally occurring substance and is not added to food, tyramine is not listed on food labels. People taking MAOI medications need to follow a careful, low tyramine diet but other headache sufferers may be experience tyramine induced headache.

Foods high in tyramine often are high protein foods that have not been properly stored (the warmer the temperature the faster tyramine accumulates.) All food, especially high protein foods, should be prepared and eaten fresh. Be cautious of leftovers that you want to store for more than 2 or 3 days. Refer to the diet for MAOI users for more details.

**Alcohol**
Some people get headaches from alcohol. Others react mostly to red wine (especially Chianti), which is a sensitivity to chemicals, other than alcohol, in the red wine. People who are sensitive to red wine are often also sensitive to chocolate.

In all cases, please speak with your Physician and/or Pharmacist re: alcohol intake, as many medications react with alcohol.

Others

The following is a list of some other foods and food ingredients, which people have reported headache sensitivity. This is not an all-inclusive list. You may have sensitivities to foods not listed. You may also have no problems with any or all of the following items:

- Sulfites
- Raw onions
- MSG (monosodium Glutamate)
- Aspartame (?)
- Aged cheeses
- Citrus fruits and juices (usually, ½ cup per day is not a problem)
- Nitrates and nitrites added to food (note: not the thiamine mononitrite added to bread – that is just a chemical name for Vitamin B1)

Please note that sensitivities are often quantity related and are more likely to be problematic when consumed on an empty stomach – for instance, processed soups containing hydrolyzed yeast (contains some tyramine) and MSG in a variety of foods.

Caffeine content of Selected Beverages:

Carbonated beverages 12 oz. (regular and sugar-free): 0 – 50 mg. (colas, unless marked caffeine free, and Mountain Dew are ~ 50 mg)
Coffees 6 oz. 100 mg. (that means a 12 oz. mug is 200 mg.)
Teas 6 oz. 30-60 mg. (caffeine increases with length of brew)
Decaffeinated Teas and Coffees 6 oz. ~ 2 mg.

Additional Notes:
Some people who get migraine headache may experience subtle warning signals 4 to 72 hours before the actual onset of the headache or aura. These symptoms may include food cravings. While chocolate may trigger migraine in some people there is good evidence to suggest that a patient with migraine may experience a craving for chocolate up to several days before the onset of the headache. If they eat the chocolate and the headache occurs, it is natural to assume that the chocolate actually caused the headache.
But in reality, both the chocolate cravings and the migraine are caused by the same root problem and the chocolate is not at fault.

*Headache Sufferer's Diet is replacing The Complete Headache Chart and Diet and Headache - Food*

*To read our complete Consumer Topic sheets or Medications.*

(From www.headaches.org)