A Pain in my...Head!
By Kara Siedman

Have you ever said to yourself, “this is the worst headache ever? All I want to do is find a dark, quiet hole to lie down and never come out of.” If yes, you may be experiencing a migraine headache.

The cause of a migraine remains unknown, but may be due to chemical changes in the brain, and/or dietary and lifestyle habits, which cause the blood vessels, in the brain, to become dilated and inflamed, causing severe pain. Whatever the cause be, there are number of things that will trigger a migraine to occur.

**Most wanted list**

Being aware of what can trigger a migraine may help to prevent them from happening. Often these triggers are combined with more than one. Common triggers include:

- **Hormonal changes.** The exact relationship is unclear, but fluctuations in estrogen may cause the onset of a migraine. Women have reported occurrence of migraines immediately before and during their periods, as well as during pregnancy and menopause, which corresponds to a major drop in estrogen.
- **Stress.** A hard day or week followed by lying down on one side of the head may trigger a migraine. Managing stress is important to reduce the frequency of attacks. Try deep breathing or taking a break from a stressful situation. Adapting methods to reduce stress can be a great tool in preventing a migraine.
- **Food.** Many foods play a role in migraine occurrence. Avoiding certain foods (see below) can help prevent a migraine. Skipping meals can also contribute to a migraine attack.
- **Sensory stimuli.** Bright lights, loud noises, and unusual smells can be a trigger.
- **Sleep patterns.** Too much or too little sleep can contribute to a migraine headache. Going to bed and waking up at the same time may reduce likelihood of a migraine.
- **Environmental changes.** Weather, pressure, changes in season, and altitude may play a role.
- **Physical activity.** Intense physical exertion may cause a migraine attack. Regular exercise may help to reduce the duration and frequency of a migraine. Avoid working out in extreme heat.

Food, Food, Glorious Food!

We have to eat to live, but what if what you are eating causes you to have the worst pain? Food is one of the most common triggers of a migraine. Food triggers are usually combined with other known triggers, like stress and/or hormonal changes. Use this chart as a guide to find which foods in your diet may be triggering a migraine.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Item</th>
<th>Known Triggers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fruits</td>
<td>Figs, raisins, papayas, avocados and bananas (especially if overripe), red plums.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables/Legumes</td>
<td>Beans (broad, fava, garbanzo, pinto, lima, and navy). Peanut butter, nuts. Sauerkraut, string beans, raw garlic, snow peas, olives, pickles, onions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breads/Grains</td>
<td>Breads, cakes, pastry containing yeast. Breads, crackers, pastry containing cheese or chocolate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy Products</td>
<td>Cultured dairy products (sour cream, buttermilk, yogurt). Aged and unpasteurized cheeses (blue, Gouda, mozzarella, etc).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat, Fish, Poultry</td>
<td>Aged, canned, cured, or processed meat. Any meat prepared with meat tenderizer, yeast, soy sauce. Avoid deli meats containing nitrates/nitrites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverages</td>
<td>Hot chocolate. Alcoholic beverages (especially red wine and beer). Caffeine (may trigger in some people and may be helpful in others).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>Monosodium glutamate (MSG), yeast/yeast extract, meat tenderizer, nitrates/nitrites, anything fermented, pickled, or marinated, vinegar (except white).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Be a Detective!**

In order to find which foods or triggers are causing your migraines, you have to pay very close attention to not only your dietary habits, but your lifestyle habits as well. Here is a list of tools to use to help you find what may be initiating your migraine:

- **Keep a diary.** Writing down the frequency and occurrence, time of day, feelings and emotions before the migraine strikes, foods you ate that day or the day or two before the migraine began, sleep patterns around the time of the migraine, the weather outside, and level of physical activity around time of migraine can all be important and crucial to finding what your triggers are. Having this diary will enable you to go back and look at each time a migraine occurred, therefore making it easier to find relationships with each episode. Finding these similarities will get you one step closer in being able to prevent a migraine before it happens.

- **Try an elimination/rechallenge diet.** This involves eliminating the known trigger foods from your diet and then reintroducing them back in one at a time, keeping track of frequency,
intensity, and duration of the migraine. Keep in mind that it may be a combination of foods that trigger the migraine.

A migraine headache can be immobilizing and most of all painful. Being aware of your triggers may make it easier to prevent and catch a migraine from occurring. If migraines persist and/or worsen, consult a healthcare professional to seek medical treatment.

References:
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