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Help minimize your migraines with smart nutrition

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If you've ever experienced a migraine headache, you know how awful it can be. The throbbing pain and nausea can make you want to retreat into a dark, quiet room until the pain goes away. As a result, migraine sufferers often miss days of work and important family activities.

For chronic migraine sufferers — those who experience 14 or more per month — this can have a big impact on quality of life.

Learning to identify what triggers your migraines can go a long way toward helping you manage them.

What is a migraine?

A migraine is a severe, throbbing headache, usually on one side of the head, that can last anywhere from 4 to 72 hours. Attacks may occur as rarely as once a year or as often as several times a week.

In addition to headache pain, common migraine symptoms include:

- Nausea and dizziness
- Increased sensitivity to light, smells, and sound
- Visual sensations such as blind spots, blurred vision or flashes of light
- Pain and tightness around the forehead, temples, or back of the head and neck
- Tingling sensation on your face or limbs
- Feeling tired or ill

Some people experience warning signs known as “aura” before or during a migraine. Aura symptoms can include vision changes, dizziness, tingling, phantom smells, and more.

Although migraines can be intense, they are rarely a sign of a more serious condition.

What causes a migraine?

A single cause for migraines isn't known yet, but genetics and environmental factors seem to play a role. Researchers are also studying how the brain and the nervous system interact, noting that the levels of certain brain chemicals drop during migraines.

Conditions or factors that contribute to migraines are known as “triggers.” Different people have different triggers, so something that brings on a migraine in one person may not affect another.

Common migraine triggers include:

- Poor quality sleep
- Skipping meals
- Strong odors
- Dehydration

- Medication overuse
- Allergies and food sensitivities
- Changes in the weather

Some triggers, like changes in the weather, are unavoidable. But many triggers can be avoided with simple lifestyle changes. In fact, from 12% to 60% of people with migraines report they're triggered by eating certain foods.*

Foods that commonly trigger migraines

While food triggers vary widely from person to person, processed foods and alcohol are often mentioned. Here are some foods frequently reported to trigger migraines:

- Alcohol, including red wine and beer
- Artificial sweeteners
- Foods containing monosodium glutamate (MSG), including soy sauce, meat tenderizer, and seasoned salt
- Processed meats, such as sausage and pepperoni
- Smoked, fermented, pickled, or marinated foods, including fish
- Aged or ripened cheese
- Cultured dairy products, like yogurt and kefir
- Chocolate
- Nuts and nut butters
- Excessive amounts of tea, coffee, or cola
- Refined sugar
- Wheat, rye, and barley, for people who are sensitive to gluten

Natural ways to manage migraines

If you're a migraine sufferer, you can start to identify any food triggers with a migraine diary. Note the severity of your migraine, the symptoms, and what you were eating and drinking, and doing up to 24 hours before it began. Over time, you may see a relationship between certain foods and activities and your migraines.

To identify specific food triggers, try cutting out individual foods one at a time and see if you notice a change in your symptoms.

Remember: Other triggers like stress and hormonal changes may overlap with food, making it difficult to identify a single cause, so be patient.

Next, share your migraine diary with your health care provider, who may have additional suggestions for management or treatment.

Living with migraines can be challenging, but tracking how your body responds to food and other triggers may help you experience fewer headaches, feel more in control of your health, and increase your peace of mind.

*Finocchi and Sivori, "Food as trigger and aggravating factor of migraine," *Neurological Sciences*, May 2012.

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