

## Headaches – the aching truth

Headaches are becoming a more common complaint among many of us. Do you regularly get that dull heavy sensation that grows to a throbbing ache? Frequent headaches can interfere with your daily life and your work performance and productivity. Popping a pill is the easy short term fix. Finding out what your triggers are is the ideal long term solution!



### Did you know?

The most common cause of headaches and migraines is a dip in blood sugar!

Sometimes caffeine helps curb headaches. In fact, many headache medications contain caffeine. But heavy daily caffeine use - more than 600 milligrams of caffeine a day, or about 4 - 7 cups of coffee - can cause headaches and irritability.

### Common headache triggers:

Not all of the common triggers below may affect you personally. If you are unsure then consider keeping a food diary as mentioned below.

#### 1. Common trigger foods to watch out for:

- ✔ Avoid foods rich in tyramine (a common amino acid):  
*Cheeses, especially aged cheese such as Cheddar, Brie & Stilton, Red wines, Biltong, Avocado, Bananas*
- ✔ Foods with nitrates  
*Luncheon cold meats, bacon, sausages, hot dogs, salami*
- ✔ Onions
- ✔ Citrus fruits (*Oranges and lemons*)
- ✔ Chocolate
- ✔ Caffeine in excess
- ✔ MSG - mono sodium glutamate (*found in soya sauce, packaged soups and stews, gravy mixes, meat tenderizers and many preserved convenience foods*)  
Alcoholic beverages (*especially red wine*) or simply excess thereof!  
Allergens: wheat, shellfish, eggs, beef, pork etcō (if you are susceptible)

#### 2. Skipping meals:

Skipping meals lowers your body's blood sugar, which has been shown to trigger headaches and migraines in susceptible persons.

#### 3. Other causes:

- ✔ Ovulation or menstruation
- ✔ Medications (*read inserts to your medications to find out*)
- ✔ Environmental changes such as *high temperatures, bright lights, loud noises, smoke, fumes, strong odors, or changes in altitude*
- ✔ Changes in sleep patterns
- ✔ Jet lag
- ✔ Mind-body triggers: Misalignments of the cervical vertebrae in the neck can trigger headaches and are usually the result of stiffness in the back and shoulders. We spend far too much time sitting all tensed up in front of our PCs!

## Dos for diet

People who experience regular headaches may have a number of triggers, and thus, a combination of factors can 'break the camel's back'. By reducing the triggers, you reduce the chances of a headache or migraine.

## Do's for your diet:

### 1. Balance your blood sugar and avoid low blood sugar incidents:

Achieve this by:

- ✓ Eating every few hours and opting for smaller more regular meals or snacks
- ✓ Avoid skipping meals
- ✓ Stay hydrated throughout the day
- ✓ Eat balanced meals according to plate model i.e. Equal amounts of slow releasing carbohydrates and lean protein with plenty veggies, salads or fresh fruit.
- ✓ Investigate possible herbal remedies such as feverfew, lavender oils, chamomile tea.

### 2. Avoid trigger foods

Achieve this by:

- ✓ Keeping a food/drink and headache diary to help you figure out if you are sensitive or allergic to certain foods, drinks or food additives
- ✓ A diary may help you determine what triggers your headaches. Note when your headaches start, what you were doing at the time, how long they last and what, if anything, provides relief. A comprehensive diary that also tracks what you eat and drink will help you to pick up patterns in your food choices, eating habits and prevalence of headaches.

**If you suspect your headaches are related to a food allergy then consult a registered dietician. A dietician can assist you to do an 'Elimination Diet' to identify allergens.**



## Do's for your lifestyle:

- ✓ Identifying if posture, work ergonomics, driving, etc.. are causing irritation.
- ✓ Try techniques such as tension-reducing massage and regular neck stretching.
- ✓ Get enough sleep. Wake up and go to bed at the same time every day - even on weekends.
- ✓ Deep breathing and relaxation massages when you can squeeze them in!
- ✓ Regular exercise is a must.