HEADACHES & MIGRAINIES: The Roles of Diet and Digestion

By Liliane Papin

In Oriental medicine, headaches are differentiated according to their location and characteristics. To determine treatment, an acupuncturist will typically ask about the nature of the pain (dull, sharp, throbbing), where and when headaches tend to occur, and what typically makes them worse or better: cold, heat, exercise, rest, etc. After these few questions, the acupuncturist will treat a few points, most of them on the hands and feet (which might come as a surprise). The points are chosen along meridian pathways that reach the head and can help “drain” the excess energy from the head or, on the contrary, supply missing “Qi” to the head. The Gallbladder meridian goes to the side of the head, the Liver meridian to the top, and the Stomach to the face and front. Another important point is a point on the hand called “He Gu” — or Large Intestine 4 — known as a “command” point for the head and face and therefore a point of choice in the treatment of headaches.

Below are three typical differentiations of headaches. Some of the points may be used for acupressure and might be enough for you to help yourself or a grateful relative or friend. Diet and digestion play a big part in the occurrence of headaches and some nutrition changes are often enough to address long-standing and stubborn chronic headaches.

The headaches feel dull in nature, get worse with activity and standing and stubborn chronic headaches.

For you to help yourself or a grateful relative or friend. Diet and digestion play a big part in the occurrence of headaches and some nutrition changes are often enough to address long-standing and stubborn chronic headaches.

Severe headaches or migraine headaches: often more temporal, sharp or throbbing, triggered or aggravated by tension or, on the contrary, by a sudden release of tension as is the case in “weekend headaches.” Severe cases might include sensitivity to light and/or vomiting. Such headaches, typically diagnosed as “Liver Yang Rising” in Oriental medicine jargon, involve mainly Liver, Gallbladder and Stomach. Greasy foods (Gallbladder involvement), exposure to certain chemical environments or foods (MSG), alcohol, stress, or fiery emotions may all be triggers. An acupuncturist will typically needle “Liver 3” or “Stomach 44” on the feet together with local head points that we intuitively massage on our own. Acupuncture is very quick and effective in relieving the painful accompanying symptoms of vomiting, nausea, or chest tightness. Herbal medicines would also address Liver and Gallbladder imbalance. Diet-wise, excess sugar, greasy foods, alcohol, excess of egg and red meat consumption are common culprits. A hurried lifestyle, stress, eating on the run or while standing up are among other common causes. Mint tea, dandelion tea, milk thistle tea are mild folk remedies that can ease the stress on the liver. Good quality grains and vegetables are our best friends.

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The Roles of Diet

Morning is a “Yang” rising time, a time when we need good “fuel” and a reserve of energy to function throughout the day. Traditional herbal remedies would include Qi and Blood “tonics.” Diet-wise, adjustments should include good sources of protein such as fish, good sources of iron, minerals and vitamins such as leafy green vegetables (kale, mustard greens, collards, parsley), sea vegetables (very rich in minerals), whole grains (rich in vitamin B), as well as regular meals. Many American people start their day on an empty stomach or on empty calories of coffee, fruit juice, and sugar. Morning is a “Yang” rising time, a time when we need good “fuel” and a reserve of energy to function throughout the day. Cold foods are best avoided at that time since we need to ignite our inner “cauldron.” A gruel made of grain, vegetables, or good source of protein was a typical breakfast shared by most traditional cultures in the world until very recently, and is still the healthiest source of energy.

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TRY THIS!
How to practice acupressure: Rub your hands together to get the “Qi” flowing; hold the fat of the thumb or finger knuckle on those points for at least five to ten minutes or possibly longer. (It can be done on oneself but is of course more pleasant and effective if someone else does it.) You might at some point feel a tingling or kind of surge underneath your thumbs as if a ‘blob’ of energy was bursting. Sensations may vary but a successful result is easy to assess: the headache is either gone or significantly reduced!

Some relief with acupressure.

Large Intestine 4 (He Gu/Joining Valley), ‘the command point’ for the face and a major point in the treatment of all headaches.

Liver 3 (Tai Chong/Great Gushing): for any type of headache, but particularly effective for temporal headaches.

Stomach 44 (Nei Ting/Inner Courtyard): especially good for frontal and sinus-related types of headaches.

Kidney and Bladder meridian blockages, might occasionally flare up into ‘Liver Yang Rising’ types. In such cases, the cooling Kidney energy is unable to restrain the excess fire of the Liver and Gallbladder. An acupuncture treatment would include two phases, the first one focusing on the immediate symptoms (severe pain and temporal headache), the second one addressing the more chronic underlying cause. In some cases, headaches might accompany diseases such as hypertension or diabetes that also need to be addressed. It is best to avoid regular use of over-the-counter medications that may create problems of their own in the long run—particularly stomach troubles or what are known as ‘rebound’ symptoms: a worsening of the condition when stopping the medication. This is especially true of some sinus medications. However, while acupuncture and herbal remedies are great allies to take care of immediate pain and symptoms, our full participation is crucial in treating the underlying causes of lifestyle and diet. Headaches are mostly distress signals trying to get us to pause, pay attention, and listen.

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