Headache Alternatives
Drug-Free Therapies for Preventing, Reducing, and Ending the Pain of Migraines and Other Headaches
by Alexander Mauskop, MD

Sooner or later, 90% of all Americans suffer from headaches. Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising, considering how many types of headaches there are, including tension, sinus, cluster, and migraine. Unfortunately, for many people, headaches are not a temporary inconvenience, but a chronic problem that can incapacitate them and even lead to depression and isolation.

Headache therapy traditionally relies on medications, and so have I. For over two decades in my own practice, I've used everything from simple over-the-counter drugs to the latest prescription migraine relievers. But I'm also a firm believer in numerous non-traditional therapies that have been shown to diminish, even eliminate, the need for drugs among patients fighting chronic, sometimes incapacitating, headaches.

Nor am I alone in my belief. The use of nontraditional therapies in migraine and headache treatment is increasing as more patients turn toward them. In addition, it's estimated that more than 30% of headache patients do not respond to pharmacologic interventions. Whether they offer them or not, physicians need to be aware of these alternative treatments, as many of their patients may be involved with them.

This article will examine a number of alternative approaches, both nutritional and behavioral, including magnesium, riboflavin or vitamin B2, feverfew, coenzyme Q10, alpha-lipoic acid, butterbur, acupuncture, biofeedback, aerobic exercise, and neck exercise. As remedies, all are non-prescriptive, non- or minimally invasive, safe, accessible, and demonstrably effective in varying degrees.

The Magnesium Factor
Many may have heard about the value of various herbal supplements in treating headaches - some of which we'll be examining below - but one nutritional supplement too rarely considered is also one of my favorites. It's magnesium, which has long been identified as playing an integral role in the pathogenesis of migraines and repeatedly proven effective in providing good, sustained, quick relief of a headache's symptoms.

Migraine patients frequently exhibit low serum and tissue levels of magnesium and respond well to treatment with magnesium. In one study, 85% of people who were deficient in the midst of a migraine attack found relief within minutes of receiving magnesium intravenously. In another, subjects who suffered from at least four migraines a week were split into two groups. One group received a placebo; the other received 600 mg of magnesium daily for 12 weeks. Toward the end of the study, only 15.8% of the placebo group reported their migraines had been reduced. The magnesium takers reported a dramatic reduction of 42%.

Magnesium's efficacy is in part due to its effect on serotonin receptors, which help transmit pain messages to the brain. Since magnesium enhances the function of serotonin, magnesium supplements can also relieve headache pain. Magnesium also plays a vital role in maintaining blood vessel health, which is important to note, because constricted blood vessels are now believed responsible for causing some headaches.

There are two ways to add magnesium to a patient's system. The first I recommend is by enhancing its presence in a patient's diet. This is not especially difficult for most people since the foods richest in magnesium are whole grains, bran, nuts, beans, bananas, seafood, and dark green leafy vegetables like spinach - all readily available and easily included in tasty menu items.

The second approach is supplements, using as a guideline the recommended daily intake of magnesium, which is 400 mg for men and 350 mg for women. For some people, many magnesium-rich foods, including nuts and chocolate, can also act as headache triggers. There are a variety of magnesium supplements, but we often start with the least expensive one, magnesium...
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> oxide. If a patient develops diarrhea (most people can avoid it by taking magnesium supplements with food), we try other forms of magnesium — chelated (magnesium aspartate or magnesium diglycinate) or slow-release forms.

Riboflavin
Riboflavin, or vitamin B2, plays several roles in the body, and riboflavin deficiency can lead to several unpleasant symptoms, including headaches. One study of 55 headache sufferers found riboflavin treatment to be superior to a placebo in reducing the frequency of attacks and number of headache days. Migraine sufferers appear to need relatively large amounts of riboflavin because of a defect in their mitochondria, the energy generator of cellular tissue. For these individuals, supplements can make a significant difference.

Feverfew and Butterbur
Feverfew, too, can help relieve migraines and other headaches. British herbalists noted its effectiveness as early as 1649, and, over the centuries, it's been forgotten and "discovered" more than once. Today, it's used to treat a number of ailments, including headaches.

Feverfew also shares a distinction with another herb, butterbur. Both are the only herbal headache remedies that have been subjected to randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trials. In some studies, butterbur emerged as an effective preventive treatment for headaches, while both were shown to be mildly successful in reducing the number of migraine attacks, though not their duration. Feverfew was also judged to have lessened the intensity of migraine pain and reduced the severity of nausea and vomiting.

Alpha-Lipoic acid and Coenzyme Q10
Two more supplements worth considering are alpha-lipoic acid and coenzyme Q10. Alpha-Lipoic acid is an antioxidant the body's cells use to produce energy. Coenzyme Q10 is naturally found in cell mitochondria, where energy is produced, and naturally declines with age. Both have been found potentially valuable in treating headaches.

The Pain-Free Needle
Years ago, Western doctors learned to respect and utilize the Asian practice called acupuncture, which involves applying hair-thin stainless steel needles to key pain control points along the body. Depending on the type of pain reported, different pain points are targeted. While further research is needed, numerous studies suggest acupuncture can also lessen the pain of migraines and muscle tension headaches, both as an adjunct and an alternative therapy. For chronic headaches, acupuncture treatment usually entails at least ten sessions, lasting 20 to 30 minutes once or twice a week to start, with their frequency lessening as pain diminishes, often with electrical stimulation of the needles rather than the traditional manual twirling. Patients may initially feel some tingling or other sensations, but should eventually grow quite comfortable with the treatment. Women should let their acupuncturists know if they are pregnant, as certain sites need to be avoided. Everyone should insist their practitioners (there are now more than 6,500) use disposable needles, instead of reusing sterilized ones.

Power of the Mind
Medicine has long recognized the strong link between the mind and the body. One way of tapping into this link is through a process called biofeedback. Every body has certain involuntary responses. A person's pulse and heart will beat, lungs will breathe, and blood will flow without any conscious help. We now know we can control these and other responses — and in so doing also fight headaches.

There are several biofeedback methods. One used most often for people with headaches is electromyography (EMG) therapy, which uses electricity to help patients with tension-type headaches recognize pericranial muscle activity in the face and neck. Other popular forms of biofeedback training include thermal "hand-warming" and neurofeedback (EEG). The training enables sufferers to learn to recognize stress-related physiologic responses by teaching them to electronically monitor responses, then use "feedback" to regulate intensity.

Biofeedback helps at least half of all headache sufferers relieve their pain by up to 80%. But the process isn't easy and usually takes several sessions of biofeedback training, lasting up to an hour each, in a doctor's office to achieve a significant level of success. As with acupuncture, the process starts by finding a reputable therapist, but some patients are eventually able to continue practicing biofeedback by themselves at home — an outcome not possible with acupuncture.

Dr. Mauskop is a Fellow of the American Academy of Neurology and director of the New York Headache Center. You can find more information on these therapies and others on his website, www.NYheadache.com, and in his books, The Headache Alternative: A Neurologist's Guide to Drug-Free Relief and What Your Doctor May NOT Tell You About Migraines.
The Exercise Option

Exercise is another excellent, readily available way to prevent headaches, especially among those who consider remote controls an effective antidote for movement.

Aerobic exercise, even brisk walks for 20-30 minutes a day, can help fight migraines in myriad ways. Exercise lowers stress levels and all the negative bodily changes stress induces, such as muscle tension and the release of stress-related chemicals into the bloodstream. It induces relaxation and increases both blood and lymph circulation, bringing more oxygen to bodily tissues and more quickly clearing away toxins. Exercise also increases the body's production of endorphins, a natural painkiller. It reduces fatigue, depression, and anxiety, while improving sleep quality and digestion by toning abdominal muscles and improving peristalsis.

On the non-aerobic side, neck exercises are good for relieving tension and are doable even while working at a desk. Isometric (that is, strengthening) neck exercises, in effect, can be used to short circuit a tension or even a migraine headache by preventing neck muscles from knotting up or tightening. Neck exercises are good for relieving tension in the neck and upper back.

Conclusion

These are a few of the reliable non-drug therapies that can help relieve migraines and other types of headaches. Though everyone shares the same basic physiology, the triggers for headaches are as unique as the individuals experiencing their pain. Specific foods, lifestyles, genetic make-up, nutritional deficiencies, and many additional conditions can induce frequent or chronic headache suffering. This is why no single treatment is right for every person and why a combination of treatments, including one or more of the non-traditional alternatives examined above, is often the most helpful in achieving success.