Natural Rx for Migraines

Migraine headaches are usually easily preventable and treatable using natural therapies. Once again, however, almost all that patients hear about are expensive medications - because they are expensive. In this month's column, we will review migraine headaches, discuss how to prevent and eliminate them naturally, and consider the pros and cons of prescription therapies as well. For those seeking more detailed information on these issues, I recommend my book Pain Free 1-2-3! (McGraw Hill, 2006).

Migraines

Migraine headaches can be very severe and often leave people crippled for days. They may afflict as many as 28 million Americans. Migraines are often preceded by an "aura," which may consist of visual disturbances such as flashing lights. The headaches are often associated with nausea, sweats, dizziness, and slurred speech. Light and sound sensitivity can also be severe.

There is still marked debate over the cause of migraines. For decades, researchers thought that these occurred because of excessive contraction and expansion of the blood vessels in the brain. Others thought that this blood vessel problem occurred because of inadequate serotonin, the neurotransmitter that controls sleep and mood, which also plays a role in how blood vessels expand. Low serotonin also amplifies pain by increasing the pain neurotransmitter called substance P. Muscle spasm and nutritional imbalances and deficiencies can also contribute to migraines as can food sensitivities. Most likely, it is a common endpoint for many different underlying problems.

Effective migraine treatment is important. Not only are migraines horribly painful for many people, but they are expensive as well. The average number of workdays missed by those with migraines is 19.6 days a year, costing employers $3000 per year, per employee. The condition is also undertreated, with 31% of migraine patients never seeking treatment.

What Natural Remedies Can I Use to Knock Out an Acute Migraine?

Two natural treatments can knock out an acute migraine. The first, which you can take at home on your own, is butterbur. This herb can both prevent and eliminate migraines. Take 50 mg three times a day for one month and then 50 mg twice a day to prevent migraines. You can take 100 mg every three hours to eliminate an acute migraine. Use only high-quality brands (e.g., Integrative Therapeutics [ITI]). Many other brands that were tested had impurities and did not contain the amount of butterbur the label claimed (i.e., they don't work).

In a hospital emergency room or a doctor's office, intravenous magnesium can effectively eliminate an acute migraine. In one study of 30 patients with moderate or severe migraine attacks, half received 1 g of magnesium sulfate IV over 15 minutes and the other half placebo. Those in the placebo group who were not better at a one half-hour were then treated with the magnesium. Immediately after treatment, then at 30 minutes, and at two hours, 86% in the magnesium group were pain-free, with the other 14% showing a reduction in pain. Associated symptoms such as nausea, light sensitivity, and irritability also resolved, and none of the patients in the magnesium group had a recurrence of pain within 24 hours. In the placebo group, no patient became pain-free, and only one had a reduction in pain. When patients in the placebo group were later given the magnesium, responses were similar to subjects in the other magnesium-treated group. Mild side effects, which are a normal effect of magnesium working to open...
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blood vessels, such as a burning sensation in the face and neck, flushing, and a drop in blood pressure of 5 to 10 mm systolic occurred in 86% of the patients. None of these side effects was serious, and no patient had to discontinue the treatment. These results were similar to those in previous reports.1-3

I'm Happy I Can Eliminate an Acute Migraine Headache, but How Can I Prevent Them?

In addition to being able to treat acute migraines more effectively, many medications can prevent them. Together, these medications reduce the number of headache days per month by an average of 50%.4 These medications include beta-blockers (Inderal®), calcium channel blockers, Neurontin®, Depakote®, Topamax®, Elavil®, and Doxepin®. Although Inderal XL can be helpful, it may aggravate fatigue, asthma, or depression. Fortunately, natural remedies are even more effective in preventing migraines. They may take up to three months to start working, however, so the above medications can be used while you’re waiting for the natural preventives to take effect.

Magnesium by mouth has been found to be effective for migraine prevention and is as effective as Elavil®.5 Magnesium serves in an enormous number of functions in the body, including the relaxation of muscles and arteries. Most Americans get nowhere near the optimum amount of magnesium in their diet, getting less than 250 mg a day as opposed to the 650 mg that the average Chinese diet supplies. Blood testing to check magnesium levels are horribly unreliable and may not detect magnesium deficiency until it is severe.

A leading authority on natural prevention of migraine headaches is Dr. Alexander Mauskop, author of What Your Doctor May Not Tell You about Migraines. As discussed above, in 1995, Dr. Mauskop published a study showing that intravenous magnesium could abort a migraine headache.7 He also found that intravenous magnesium could knock out other types of headaches as well.8 This powerful data spurred researchers to see whether magnesium could also prevent migraines. As noted above, the answer was yes. In a German, placebo-controlled study, patients were given 600 mg of magnesium daily for 12 weeks or a placebo; there was a significant drop in migraine frequency in the magnesium group.9 Another study shows similar effects in women with menstrual migraine (see below).10 It is a good idea for most migraine patients to take 150 to 200 mg of magnesium in the morning (present in the vitamin powder) and again with dinner or at bedtime (less, if diarrhea is a problem).

Riboflavin (vitamin B2) assists in the production of energy. In one study, migraine patients were given riboflavin 400 mg with breakfast every day for at least three months. By the end of the study, they had a 67% decrease in migraine attacks as well as a decrease in attack severity. This was later repeated in a placebo-controlled study.11 Note that it can take three months for the riboflavin to start working.

Vitamin B12 can also decrease migraine frequency. In one study in which patients received 1000 micrograms a day as a nasal spray, migraine frequencies decreased by an average of 43% after three months (the vitamin powder/B-complex contains 500 micrograms a day).12

Feverfew is another helpful herb for migraine prevention.13 Using feverfew has resulted in a significant reduction in migraines in one-third of patients. It was also found to be very safe.14

Butterbur is a shrub which grows in Europe, Asia, and Africa. A standardized extract called Petadolex® was used in two double-blind studies. By the third month, those receiving active treatment with 100 mg a day had 60% fewer migraine attacks than the control group. Although 100 mg a day is effective, 75 mg twice a day with food may be the optimal dose.15

Fish oil has also been found to decrease the frequency of migraines. In two placebo-controlled studies of patients with frequent severe migraines that did not respond to medication, fish oil was found to be effective. Use one to two tablespoons a day and give the treatment six weeks to see the effect. Then you can decrease it to the lowest dose that maintains benefit.16-17

Other natural compounds that may be helpful include glucosamine, 1500 to 2000 mg a day (this compound was found to be helpful in a small study of ten patients over four to six weeks). Coenzyme Q10, 150-200 mg daily, decreased the average number of migraine attacks per month from 4.8 to 2.8 in an open study.18

All this suggests that many, if not most, migraines can be prevented naturally. I would begin by taking the Energy Revitalization System vitamin powder (from ITI), plus 300 mg of Vitamin B2 in the morning, plus 200 mg of magnesium at night. If the cost is not prohibitive, I would add butterbur as well, using only the Petadolex form. Also check for food allergies, as noted below, and follow the advice for hormones if the migraines occur predominately around your periods or are associated with taking estrogen. I have seen this approach commonly eliminate frequent and horribly severe migraine problems, but remember once more that it may take three months to see the effect.
What Medications Can I Take to Get Rid of an Acute Migraine Headache?

It’s nice to have alternatives while waiting for the natural therapies to start preventing the migraines. In the US, medications in the Imitrex® family still remain the first choice among most experts. This new family of medications, called triptans, has increased our ability to treat migraine headaches effectively. Imitrex comes in 25, 50, and 100 mg tablets, and up to 100 mg may be taken at a time. If pain persists at two hours, another dose of up to 100 mg can be taken. In addition, it is also available by nasal spray, using a dose of up to 20 mg initially, followed by one more spray of up to 20 mg two hours later, if needed. Another alternative is a 25 mg subcutaneous injection, which can also be repeated one hour later, if needed. It is reasonable to try these different forms to see what works best for your migraines. You may also want to try a new cousin called Amerg®. Use 25 mg initially. This dose may be repeated four hours later, if needed. Your physician may also use other related medications such as Zomig®, Axert®, or Relpax®.

Of course, there is a little secret that the drug companies are not interested in having you discover. A well-done randomized controlled trial showed that the old standby of aspirin, 500 mg, plus acetaminophen 500 mg, plus caffeine 130 mg (total cost @ 30 cents) was significantly (p<.05) more effective than Imitrex 50 mg in a head-on blinded trial. This is certainly a good combination to begin with if you need to add medications, and as studies show that Napoxyn and Imitrex taken together are synergistic, the same likely applies to taking triptans with caffeine/aspirin/Tylenol combinations.

Imitrex has been found to be effective in eliminating an acute migraine attack in 34 to 70% of patients within two hours. Unfortunately, at least 30 to 40% of patients remained unsuccessfully treated. Axert® (almotriptan 6.5 to 12.5 mg, which can be repeated in two hours) is similar in effectiveness to Imitrex but less expensive ($10.50 vs. $16.50).

Other medications can also be helpful for acute migraines. Many patients get relief with Midrin®, which is a mix of three medications. Take two capsules immediately, followed by one capsule every hour until the headache is relieved (to a maximum of five capsules within a 12-hour period). It can also be helpful for tension headaches in a dose of two capsules, four times a day, as needed. Many patients find this to be quite helpful, and it is not addictive. Fiorinal® can also be effective but is addictive, and I prefer not to use this medication.

A fascinating study can guide you as to when to use Imitrex family medications vs. when to go with other therapies. At last years’ American Academy of Neurology meeting, Dr. Burstein of Harvard Medical School noted that 75% of migraine patients get painful sensitivity to normal touch (e.g., from eyeglasses) around their eyes. This pain is created in a different part of the brain than the throbbing pain that gets worse with movement or coughing. The study found that if you use Imitrex before you get the tenderness/pain around the eyes, it will knock out the migraine 93% of the time. If the pain/tenderness around the eyes had already set in, Imitrex only eliminated the migraine 13% of the time (although it still helped the throbbing). In other words, if you are one of the lucky ones who does not get pain around the eyes, the Imitrex can knock out your migraine at any time. If you are one of those who get pain/tenderness around the eyes, it is a race against the clock to take the Imitrex before that pain starts. This means, take the Imitrex early in the attack (within the first five to 20 minutes) before the skin hypersensitivity gets established. For example, use it at the earliest warning signs like painful scalp or discomfort from wearing your glasses, shaving, or wearing earrings. If the pain has already fully set in before you take the Imitrex, consider using one of the other acute treatments we’ve discussed. Because of the nausea and light/sound sensitivity, anti-nausea medications can also be helpful. Phenergan® or Compazine® suppositories are two such medications.
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What Else Can I Do to Eliminate the Underlying Cause of the Migraines?

Acupuncture is another option to consider for chronic migraine and tension headaches. Treatment results in reduced pain, reduced frequency of headaches, and improved function, energy, and health. In two studies conducted in New York City and London, acupuncture was found to be cost-effective. In a randomized controlled study of 401 patients with chronic headaches (the majority having migraines), patients received up to 12 acupuncture treatments over a three-month period vs. a control group that received standard care. The acupuncture patients had 22 fewer headache days per year, 15% fewer sick days, and 25% fewer visits to the doctor.23

Food allergies are also very important to consider. Approximately 30% to 50% of migraine patients get marked improvement by avoiding certain foods, and most people with migraines are not aware of what foods are triggering their headaches. This has now been demonstrated in at least four placebo-controlled studies. Food sensitivities are an even bigger problem in children with migraines.24-27

To determine if foods are playing a role in causing your headache, it is helpful to do an elimination diet. This requires eating a very limited diet for five days. Eat only pears and lamb, and drink only bottled spring or distilled water. This kind of strict elimination diet will make it easier to tell if food allergies/sensitivities are present and triggering your migraines when you reintroduce foods into your diet. In one study, by avoiding the ten most common food triggers, subjects exhibited a dramatic reduction in the number of headaches per month, with 85% becoming headache-free. Twenty-five percent of the patients with high blood pressure also had their blood pressure reduce to normal. The most common reactive foods were wheat (78% of patients), oranges (65%), eggs (45%), tea and coffee (40% each), chocolate and milk (37% each), beef (35%), and corn, cane sugar, and yeast (33% each). Some studies also suggest that the artificial sweetener aspartame (NutraSweet®) can trigger migraines and other headaches, although this is controversial.28-29 If you have severe and frequent migraines, it is definitely worth exploring food sensitivities.30 You may also find that instead of avoiding foods that trigger your migraines for the rest of your life, you can eliminate the sensitivities/allergies using a powerfully effective acupressure technique called NAET (see www.NAET.com).

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