Yoga and Ayurveda for Headaches and Migraines

by Meggan Brummer

The Prevalence of Headaches and Migraines

How many people in the world can claim that they have never experienced the ache in their head that we commonly refer to as a headache? It is a fact that nearly all of us will suffer from a headache during our lifetime; the less fortunate will suffer from migraines.

Followed by back pain, headaches and common colds are the two main causes of time off work for Australians! According to the National Health Survey conducted in Australia from February to November 2001, 2.2 million people reported that they had headaches that had started recently and 22,000 reported headaches on a longer-term basis.¹

Migraines, classified as a disease of the nervous system, will affect around five percent of the Australian male population and 15% of the female population and are most common in the Australian population age group between 35 and 44 years of age.

Identifying Headaches and Migraines

According to Aled Francis, a Manipulative Physiotherapist from the Sydney Headache Clinic, treatment has traditionally focused on identifying certain features such as the frequency, length of time or severity of reported headache symptoms, when diagnosing a headache as a Migraine. Tension Headache, etc. Thus, a headache pain which is one-sided lasts between four and 7 hours, is of moderate to severe intensity and is diagnosed as a Migraine without Aura. Similarly, a headache that occurs on both sides of the head, lasts from 30 minutes to seven days, and is of a mild to moderate intensity, is diagnosed as a Tension Headache.² Whilst migraines tend to occur now and again, (i.e. we can anticipate when they will occur, for example, if they are hormonal then they will occur once a month with the menstrual cycle), tension headaches tend to be more constant.

Headaches are usually considered to be less severe than migraines with a lower intensity of pain, and headaches are not usually associated with the extreme visual or sensory disturbances, nausea, vomiting, irritability and intolerance of light that often accompany migraines.³

Types of Headaches

Headaches can be divided into two main categories – primary and secondary.

Primary Headaches

Headaches and migraines are generally primary headaches and the two most common types of headaches are migraine and the tension headache. Primary headaches are not related to any pre-existing medical condition. This is because there are no investigatory techniques that are able to detect what is causing these headache symptoms.

Secondary Headaches

Secondary headaches are when the headache is related to a pre-existing medical condition. For example, children often have headaches related to a middle-ear infection and adults often get headaches related to inflamed sinuses.

What causes Headaches and Migraines?

“There are virtually no investigatory or scanning techniques, e.g. X-rays or CT scans, which can detect the existence of an abnormality which is causing the migraine or tension type headache symptoms.” There are many different theories as to what could be causing a migraine. Migraines often have similar causes to headaches, and many patients suffer both. In many cases, a number of causes might combine to produce a migraine attack. It is commonly believed that headaches are the result of irritation to nerves and pain sensitive structures in the head and neck. Other countless possible causes may include:-

• Poor dietary habits and irregular eating habits – eating food low in nutrients and eating irregularly can be potent headache triggers;
• Food – foods that have been known to trigger headaches include alcohol, chocolate, citrus fruits and dairy products – especially cheese;
• Nervousness – noisy, polluted environments, a hectic lifestyle, over-activity, accumulated fatigue and excessive worrying can cause nervous headaches. Headaches of this origin are often experienced by people who try to do more than they are capable of. To cure such headaches, the causes need to be removed, life style changed, etc. Headaches of this sort that are not cured at the root level, but suppressed by painkillers, can lead to migraines;
• Constipation – mild constipation often gives rise to dullness or heaviness in the head, but when constipation becomes more chronic, with it comes a more persistent headache.
Curing Migraines

Although it is possible to cure migraines with Ayurvedic treatment, it is obviously better to prevent them in the first place - what makes this possible is the fact that migraines often come with pre-attached symptoms. If you can learn to recognize these symptoms in time then it will be easier to do something before the symptoms become full blown. Many migraine sufferers have tried one treatment or another without success. Involving the expertise of a number of health professionals and having a multi-pronged approach to curing migraines is essential.

A survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1995, indicates that nearly 15% of the Australian population was taking medication for headaches. However, once we decide to move away from pill popping to cure these pains, we discover the multitude of alternative natural options that don’t come with the negative side affects of putting chemical toxins into our system.

The Flapping Fish Pose

Relaxation poses

For any ailment, the importance of relaxation yoga poses cannot be over-emphasized. They can be performed at the beginning and end of any yoga session or at any time when the body feels tired and needs deep rest:

**Flapping Fish Pose - Matsya Kridasana**

This is a great relaxation pose. Many people naturally sleep in a variation of this pose because intuitively they feel the deep rest that can be gained from it. Lie on your stomach and interlock your fingers. Extend the right elbow so that it is pointing away from your head and point the left elbow down towards your legs. Rest your right cheek on top of your interlocked fingers. Bend your left leg, bringing your thigh close up towards your ribs. Touch your left elbow to your left knee or as close as possible. Keep your right leg straight. Relax in the final position and breathe normally. After five minutes, change sides. The bent knee and the head may be supported on a pillow for extra comfort.

As well as inducing deep relaxation, this pose stimulates digestion by stretching the intestines, helping to remove constipation. Therefore, it is especially beneficial for those people whose headaches are connected to poor digestion. This pose also re-distributes excess waistline weight.

**Pose of the Moon or Hare Pose - Shashankasana**

Sit on your heels and place the palms of your hands on your thighs. Close your eyes and relax, keeping your head and spine straight. Inhale and raise your arms above your head. As you exhale, bend the top half of your body forward from the hips. Stretch your arms out so that they rest shoulder-width apart on the ground in front of you. Rest your forehead on the floor in front of your knees. You can bend your arms slightly so that they are fully relaxed. Try to hold this position for a minute at first, building towards holding it comfortably for at least three minutes.

Moon Pose helps to calm an overactive mind common amongst headache sufferers. It gently brings fresh blood and oxygen to the head, calming and soothing frayed nerves. Moon Pose is also great for calm-
ing anger, inducing an overall sense of well-being and a peaceful state of mind.

Note that those with very high blood pressure, slipped disc or vertigo should not perform this asana.

**Palm Tree Pose – Tadasana**

Stand with your feet shoulder width apart, arms by your side. With your body weight evenly distributed on both feet, breathe in and slowly raise your arms above your head. Interlock your fingers, turning your palms upwards. To help your balance, fix and keep your eyes fixed on a point on the wall in front you, just above the level of the top of your head. Keep breathing. After a few breaths, inhale deeply and raise your heels slightly off the ground. Tighten your buttocks and stretch towards the sky. Imagine that your body is triple its normal length, stretching up as high as you can. Tuck your pelvis in so that your lower back doesn’t strain. Remember to keep your facial muscles soft and relaxed so that your head is looking upwards when you raise your body up to standing position. Relax your arms by the side of your body. Close your eyes and stand still for a few moments, allowing the breath to return to normal. Observe any sensations in your body, relaxing completely and feeling the firm connection between your feet and the ground.

**Double Angle Pose – Dwikonasana**

Stand up straight with your feet one foot apart. Take your arms behind your back without straining them and allow your hands to drop over your head, down towards the ground. Hold this final position for about ten seconds to begin with, keeping the body as relaxed as you can. To move out of the position, raise your head so that you are looking upwards and outwards and take a deep breath in as you raise your body up to standing position. Relax your arms by the side of your body. Close your eyes and stand still for a few moments, allowing the breath to return to normal. Observe any sensations in your body, relaxing completely and feeling the firm connection between your feet and the ground.

**Breathing – Pranayama**

Various rhythms and methods of breathing have different effects on the mind, body and spirit. According to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, founder of the International Art of Living Organization, 70% of the body’s toxins are released through the breath. The breath is a subtle yet powerful tool in which to release much of the stress, tension or anxiety associated with headaches and migraines.

**The Psychic Breath – Ujjayi Breathing**

Known as the pranayama that gives freedom to bondage, or the psychic breath, Ujjayi breathing is both simple and powerful. Start by sitting for a few quiet minutes in comfortable position, closing the eyes and relaxing the body completely. Begin by observing the natural breath without making any effort to change it. Then shift your awareness to your throat. Imagine that the breath is moving in and out through the throat. Gently contracting the throat muscles, breathe in and out slowly and deeply. The sound that starts to come from the throat is like the sound of a baby snoring. It is just a very gentle sound that should only be heard by you, so keep it light. Concentrate on the sound in your throat. Begin by practising the Ujjayi breath for up to five minutes, working up towards 15 to 20.

You can practise Ujjayi breathing whilst lying down, which is especially good for people suffering from insomnia, but sitting up will give you the added benefits of a rejuvenating meditation.

**Other Natural Remedies for Headaches**

**Balm**

Ayurveda suggests that balms and mixtures of various herbal oils can help to alleviate the pain of a headache. For example, combine the following ingredients for quick relief, but remember that this will not remove the cause of the pain at a root level:-

- Five parts of eucalyptus oil
- One part anise oil
- One part menthol crystals
- One part camphor
Other Natural Remedies for Migraines

Feverfew Leaves
Take one fresh feverfew leaf a day (eaten either in a salad or sandwich) as prevention for migraines. However, feverfew is not nearly as effective once the attack is underway. If no fresh leaves are available, take 125mg capsules or tablets, available from most good health food or drugstores.

Peppermint
Peppermint, in the form of peppermint oil in balms and massage oils, can be helpful if the migraine is linked to digestive problems.

Vitamins and Minerals
For the prevention or alleviation of migraines, take vitamin C, B and magnesium. A high quality multivitamin containing these is a good idea. Alternatively, good sources of magnesium are leafy, green vegetables and nuts.

Royal Jelly
Take Royal Jelly on a regular basis to prevent migraines.

Fresh Juices
Include in your diet regular intake of freshly juiced carrots, celery, beet, cucumber, spinach and parsley.

Enemas
If a headache is due to constipation, then an enema will help to relieve it almost immediately. However, if you decide to take this root, make sure that you seek professional advice first.

Modifying your diet
Choosing whole-grain products, fruits and vegetables, limiting protein and fat intake and increasing water intake could be a few helpful alterations to begin with. “A diet low in fat, refined sugar and processed food, and high in complex carbohydrates is one of the most important steps in preventing headaches.”

Therapy
Still too often doctors in large medical practices are treating patients with a huge prescription of chemical cocktails, but of most importance when treating any ailment, are looking at the emotional and mental state of a person. Going for therapy may help to uncover and overcome emotional, psychological or mental issues that are connected to your headaches and migraines, ensuring that the programme for alleviating or curing your pain is holistic, looking at you as an individual in relation to who you are and what is going on in your life.

References
2. www.sydneyheadacheclinic.com.au
5. Francis A. Manipulative Physiotherapist from the Sydney Headache Clinic.

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Meggan is a teacher of the Art of Living Course, designed by highly respected and world renowned Spiritual Master, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. The courses include yoga, meditation and a powerful breathing technique called the Suddarshan Kriya, effective in eliminating physical and mental stress toxins and has benefited millions in over 150 countries around the world. She can be contacted at meggan@artofliving.org.au www.artofliving.org
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