how to prevent
migraine
and other headaches

by Roger French

This discussion is based on a booklet by a prominent British naturopath, personal experience and a Medline review of recent medical and nutritional research.

Headaches bother most people at some time or other, but for those who suffer regular headaches, the problem is very distressing. Headaches always have a cause, whether they occur occasionally or often. If they are frequent or severe, there is a pressing need to remove that cause. It is well known that continued use of analgesics can lead to kidney disease.

The orthodox view of the cause of headaches is dilation of arteries to the brain, but this is not the cause. It is merely the mechanism which is triggered off by the true, underlying cause.

There are a number of different types of headache, the most common being migraine. Tension headaches and sinus headaches are also common. Tension headaches involve mild to moderate dull pain, often brought on by stress and/or depression. Cluster headaches involve recurring attacks with severe pain on one side of the head, and occur most frequently in men. They occur in ‘clusters’ of weeks or months, separated by long stretches of freedom from headaches. They usually last an hour or two, and recur one or more times in a 24-hour period.

Migraine affects one side of the head only, while tension headaches are felt on both sides.

Childhood headaches are common, afflicting approximately 1 in every 20 school-age children. They are mainly sinus, migraine or tension headaches.

Migraine Headaches

The word, migraine, is derived from Greek and means ‘half a head’, referring to migraine affecting one side of the head only. Over 2 million Australians have experienced migraine at some stage in their life and over half a million suffer it chronically. Another estimate is that 20% of women and 10% of men experience it regularly. These headaches are not restricted to adults; about one in ten Australian children have suffered migraine at some time. After puberty, girls are twice as likely as boys to have them.

Migraine is not just a pain in the head, it is a debilitating affliction that can leave the person incapacitated for up to 36 hours at a time, during which they may be unable to tolerate light, sound or movement. Migraine is of moderate to severe intensity, often accompanied by increased sensitivity to light and sound, the presence of an aura in about 84% of sufferers, and may be exacerbated by physical activity. An ‘aura’ is a peculiar sensation preceding the headache; it may involve visual disturbances, pins and needles, numbness, temporary paralysis in limbs, and/or speech difficulties.

The headache can be either a dull persistent pain or an unbearable, blinding, sickening pain on one side of the head only, often preceded and/or accompanied by nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, visual disturbances such as seeing flashing lights or temporary sight loss, inability to speak normally, weakness, tingling in the fingers and numbness in the face and tongue or other parts of the body.

Neurologists refer to two types of migraine: common and classical. In classical migraine, disturbance to vision, tingling, numbness, etc., precede the headache and herald the onset of the actual pain. With common migraine, the more usual variety, there are no preceding symptoms.

Migraine is hormonally sensitive. With pregnant women, it may worsen during the first trimester but usually eases later on.

According to some researchers, migraine is “a common hereditary disorder”. It’s true that it does tend to run in families, but it is not the headache that is inherited. It is the predisposition towards it that is inherited, almost invariably accompanied by the same lifestyle factors that caused headaches in the parents, especially their ‘cookbook’.

THE MIGRAINE MECHANISM

The mechanism that causes the pain in the head is a two-step process. Firstly, arteries inside the brain constrict. Secondly, there is a fall in the bloodstream of the level of a substance called serotonin (which constricts arteries), and the low level of serotonin allows arteries outside the skull to relax and dilate, which causes the pain.

The dilating of arteries irritates nerves on their outer walls, effecting the release of peptide which causes additional pain. So, with migraine there is a double shot of pain.

The fact that migraine sufferers have more sensitive arteries which dilate and constrict more easily may explain the hereditary tendency. This is consistent with the view that only the greater potential for migraine is inherited, not the disease itself.
THE CAUSES OF MIGRAINE

A prominent factor in migraine headaches is liver overload, resulting from foods and toxic chemicals that overwork and congest the liver. The liver is the body's detoxifying organ, filtering out metabolic wastes and toxic chemicals from the blood stream. If the amount of toxic substances coming to the liver is greater than it can process, it will become congested and its functions impaired.

Headaches are apparently nature's warning to stop what we are doing to cause them, otherwise liver damage is likely to eventuate.

Foods which are particularly taxing on the liver include fried foods, other very fatty foods, excessive protein especially from meat, caffeine, alcohol, many food additives, pesticides, excessive sugar, salt and, for some people, oranges.

Chemical exposure can greatly add to the liver's burden. Researchers now recognise 'toxicant-induced loss of tolerance' (TILT), a two-step disease process in which (1) chemical exposures, such as to pesticides, indoor air pollution or chemical spills, cause susceptible people to lose their natural tolerance for certain chemicals, food constituents and drugs; (2) subsequently, exposures that were previously tolerated without problems now cause symptoms. Accumulating evidence suggests that TILT may be one of the processes underlining migraine headaches. (8)

Researchers have turned up at least 60 different trigger factors for migraine. These may be dietary, environmental, psychological or pharmacologic factors.

Portuguese researchers in 2002 listed triggers – as identified by patients – in descending order as: stress, stimulation by light and sound, sleep deprivation, hunger, environmental factors, food, menstruation, fatigue, alcohol, sleep excess, caffeine, physical exertion, head trauma, falls, sexual activity, medications, neck movements, smoking and a low pillow. (9)

Reactions to food may be more common than sufferers realise. Foods may trigger attacks through allergic reactions, the most common offending foods, according to Spanish researchers, being citrus fruits, tea, coffee, pork, chocolate, milk, nuts, vegetables and cola drink. (10)

Looking at this in another way, the constituents in foods that may trigger allergic reactions that cause vascular dilation include tyramine, phenylalanine, (phenolic) flavonoids, alcohol, food additives (particularly sodium nitrate, MSG and aspartame) and caffeine.

The same researchers list a wide range of food triggers that can cause migraine presumably other than through allergy. They are: chocolate, cheese, citrus fruits, bananas, nuts, cured meats, dairy products, cereals, beans, hot dogs, pizza, food additives (sodium nitrate, MSG and aspartame), coffee, tea, cola drinks and alcoholic drinks such as red wine, beer or whisky. When cows' milk and its products, cereal grains especially wheat-flour products, and eggs trigger migraines through allergy or food sensitivity, the reason is thought to be the result of introducing them in early infancy, before the developing gut is able to properly digest them. In the case of cereals, this may be 24 months of age. The absence of breastfeeding in infancy may also be a factor.

In a trial at The Hospital For Sick Children in London, the commonest foods which provoked migraine in children were found to be cows' milk, eggs, chocolate, oranges, wheat-flour products, cheese, tomato, rye and the food additives, benzoic acid and tartrazine. Some children were also affected by fish, beef, pork, soy beans, bacon, coffee, yeast and peanuts. 93% of the children with serious migraine recovered on diets which eliminated the foods to which they were sensitive.

Not only were the headaches eradicated, but those children who also suffered from epileptic fits became free of fits in adults, trigger foods to which some sufferers are particularly sensitive include cheese, red wine, chocolates, coffee and oranges. These foods all contain vasoactive amines which can cause dilation of blood vessels. For example, cheese has tyramine, chocolate has phenylethylamine, citrus fruits have octopamine and alcohol has histamine. Other foods, such as broadbeans and yeast extract, also contain vasoactive amines.

Although the form of alcohol mostly blamed as a trigger is red wine, a study published in the journal, Cephalalgia (November 1993), found that among a group of people who suffered from alcohol-induced headache, 54% attributed the problem to white wine, 23% to beer or spirits and only 2% to red wine. The investigators concluded that white wine is the principal culprit rather than red – as far as migraine is concerned. However, red wine can certainly cause problems. The Queen Charlotte's Hospital in London found that migraine sufferers who believed that red wine was the culprit, did get migraine headaches, red wine, whereas Vodka had no such effect. (11)

Other common triggers are monosodium glutamate, some preservatives and artificial colourings, and salicylates (found in red wine, many fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices, tea, honey and peppermint).

The caffeine in tea and coffee is related to headache. An Australian study found that four to five cups daily of coffee or tea significantly increase the incidence of headache. Remember that caffeine withdrawal is also likely to bring on a headache, but this may be the last headache and the end of the problem.

There are numerous migraine triggers not related to diet. The British Migraine Clinic lists four major categories of non-diary triggers: (10)

- physical – fatigue, over-exertion, eye-strain, lack of sleep, travel.
- psychological, that is, stress – depression, worry, shock, anxiety, anger. Note that anger is an emotion that is particularly detrimental to the liver. People can harbour anger for months or years at a time.
- medical – the Pill, high blood pressure, menstruation including pre-menstrual hormones.
- external factors – noise, glaring lights, flickering lights especially from TV or computer screens, smells from perfume, cigarette smoke.

Female sex hormones are clearly linked to migraine, which is probably why women sufferers outnumber men two to one. Attacks are more common at menarche, at menstrual times, in the first trimester of pregnancy and again at menopause. Oral contraceptives and HRT are also associated with migraines. Researchers believe that it is not either consistent high or consistent low oestrogen levels, but withdrawal of oestrogen that triggers migraines.

Discontinuation of The Pill, pregnancy and menopause all involve changing oestrogen levels. (11)

Long-term or abusive use of painkillers, especially when accompanied by tension headaches associated with anxiety and/ or depression, can result in almost continuous headache. (12)

Breathing stuffy, stale air may contribute to the headache problem. Certain attitudes appear to be more common in migraine sufferers. The University of South Carolina found that sufferers were more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies, to be perfectionists, to distrust others or to feel ineffective. They noted that these states of mind may affect serotonin levels. (13)

A new theory of the cause of migraine was proposed in 2000 by Ross Singer and Sonia Grismanier in their book, Get It Up! (14) Their theory is based on the fact that the brain consumes more of the body's energy than any other
organ, using up approximately 20% of the body’s oxygen requirement when at rest. While we are upright during the day, gravity tends to pull blood away from the brain and move it towards the feet. When we lie down, blood liberally gushes into the brain and eases away from the feet. So, lying down recharges the brain.

However, if we are not down long enough, the brain hasn’t had time to recharge its pressure and we will feel fatigued. Conversely, if we lie down (or sleep) too long, the brain can become congested which will be reflected in puffy face and eyes. Significantly, the most common feature of high pressure in the head is headache! It is also accompanied by nausea, vomiting, visual disturbances and other symptoms - just like a migraine. This may explain why people who experience migraines have them more frequently after sleeping in late.

The mechanism by which the body attempts to flush out the congested brain is by dilating arteries and arterioles, which is exactly what causes the pain in migraine. After the flushing is complete, the arteries return to their normal size and the migraine has ended.

Why does migraine occur in one side of the head only? The Singer theory is that most people sleep on one side more than the other, so that one side of the brain will be more congested, and hence receive more dilation of arterioles. Also, why do women suffer migraines more than men? Because, around pre-period time, the high levels of oestrogen increase fluid retention and hence brain congestion. This theory by Singer and Grismajer seems plausible enough. Their proposed way of preventing migraines is given at the end of the next section.

THE PREVENTION OF MIGRAINE

Once a migraine strikes, it is very difficult to alleviate the pain. The only really effective solution lies in prevention. Taking drugs to deaden the pain may provide temporary relief, but problems of one kind or another are likely to continue, because not only has the cause of the trouble not been removed, but the drugs add to the burden on the usually already overloaded liver.

The orthodox medical approach involves avoidance of the triggers, treatment of the acute attack with drugs, and regular use of preventive medications. The most recently developed drug, Sumatriptan, works by facilitating the action of serotonin. (12) The other major drugs used are beta-adrenergic blockers, calcium channel blockers, antidepressants, anticonvulsants and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). (13)

With pregnant women, drug treatment poses a dilemma because the risks include birth defects, death of the embryo, abnormalities in growth of the foetus and problems at the time of birth.

Because the drugs are merely treating the symptoms and have nothing to do with removing the underlying causes, a natural health/natural therapies approach has the potential to produce much better results in the longer term.

It's probably best to consume nothing but pure water until the attack is over. Sleep may be the best natural palliative, and if you are sleeping you won't need or want to eat anyway.

A cold compress may help ease the pain. Try it on the forehead or on the back of the neck. Place a piece of cold, moist cotton sheeting over the area, and completely cover it closely with a piece of woollen material. It is essential to simultaneously apply a cold compress around the waist to draw toxins away from the head and to the eliminative organs. Wrap a single layer of cold, moist cotton sheeting 20 cm wide around the waist and completely cover it closely with woollen fabric. Go to bed with the compresses in place and sleep if possible.

If there is bowel congestion, a warm enema may provide considerable relief, not to mention the benefit to the liver. The prevention of migraine starts with nutrition.

Years ago, a registered nurse commented that, if everyone lived mainly on fresh fruit and vegetables and avoided excessive fat, there would be no migraine.

Adopt a natural foods diet, including mostly raw foods unless the digestive system cannot handle raw foods. Unnatural foods need to be replaced with natural, unprocessed foods in accordance with the guidelines of the Natural Health Society. (Refer to 'Natural Health Dietary Guidelines' elsewhere in this issue.)

If foods which are included in these guidelines, such as oranges or cheese, are still found to trigger headaches, they should also be avoided. Especially avoid the most taxing foods on the liver – fatty foods, alcohol, coffee, chocolate, refined sugar, excessive natural sugar (as in honey, maple syrup and dried fruits) and food additives.

There are a number of ways to determine if you are sensitive or allergic to particular foods. One convenient method is to keep a detailed record of everything you eat and all your symptoms. Also list what you did each day, where you went, whether the day was stressful or relaxing, and at what times you ate food. You may be able to detect a pattern showing that particular foods are usually responsible for your symptoms. It may take many months before a pattern becomes apparent.

Another way is to fast for five days on pure water under professional supervision or go on a very 'neutral' diet, after

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which you re-introduce various foods one by one, until symptoms develop which you can link with a particular food. A supervised fast has the double benefit of allowing the liver to unload some of its burden and revitalise.

Remember that if you discover that you must avoid a particular food, all sources of it must be removed from the diet. For example, in the case of milk you would need to also avoid butter, cheese, yogurt, soup containing milk or cream, ice cream, milk chocolate, and products containing milk powder, milk solids, etc.

When looking for food sensitivities, practitioners put migraine sufferers on diets that exclude salicylates, amines, MSG, food colourings and some preservatives.

A Michigan urologist has said that the mineral magnesium is in short supply in the brains of most migraine sufferers. It could be that they have low-magnesium diets or that anxious people excrete the mineral more rapidly. In either case, the basic natural foods are rich in it - legumes, seeds, nuts, whole grains and some green vegetables.

Some foods are tonic to the liver. They include lemon juice (always dilute abundantly with water), grapefruit, beetroot, celery, cabbage, dandelion and globe artichoke. Minerals and vitamins particularly needed by the liver include zinc, vitamin B6 and other B vitamins, vitamin C and bioflavonoids. Foods high in zinc include nuts (especially Brazil and cashew), legumes, seeds, whole grains, eggs and spinach. The same foods, along with green leafy vegetables and brewer’s yeast, are also high in B vitamins generally. Vitamin C is abundant in fresh, uncooked vegetables and fruits, while vitamin E is high in wheatgerm (it must be fresh), soy beans, sunflower seeds, nuts and egg yolk. The richest natural supplementary source of vitamin E is wheatgerm oil capsules.

Migraine sufferers can expect a great deal of benefit by occasionally devoting two or three days to fresh, in-season fruit juices or fresh fruit only. Good fruit for liver cleansing are grapefruit, diluted lemon, apple, and watermelon.

Be well aware that headaches may get worse briefly before they get better.

As part of the normal daily eating pattern, it is of exceptional value to include the tried-and-true ‘carrot and chlorophyll’ juice, containing liver-tonic vegetables. This consists of one-third of a glass of carrot and beetroot juice, with the remainder being the juices of fresh green vegetables such as spinach, celery, parsley, cabbage, cauliflower, dandelion. A little radish could be added too. Dilute with at least one quarter water. Ideally, consume this juice an hour before lunch and an hour before dinner, so that the fluid has left the stomach before the meal is eaten.

Studies have confirmed that the herb, feverfew, is an effective preventative for migraine headaches. It has a long history of use for aches and pains, arthritis, high blood pressure, skin conditions, fevers, inflammation and headaches. Only one variety is effective, Tanacetum parthenium. In the research, the powder was consumed at a dosage of 50 mg per day for significant protection. Note that it is not a pain reliever.

Researchers have investigated natural therapies for headaches. The Department of Complementary Medicine at the University of Exeter in the UK found that migraines and other headaches are benefited by a wide range of therapies, specifically, aromatherapy, Bowen technique, chiropractic, hypnotherapy, massage, nutrition, reflexology, Reiki and yoga.

Although the New York Headache Center made the observation in 2001 that complementary treatments often lack scientific proof of efficacy, they noted that this is also true for many drugs. They added that many complementary treatments are inexpensive, harmless and possibly effective. Their preferred options are aerobic exercise, isometric neck exercises, biofeedback, acupuncture and an oral preparation containing magnesium, vitamin B2 and feverfew.

Biofeedback refers to using electronic monitoring to give continuing signals on changes in bodily functions. In case there is spinal misalignment in the neck, have a check-up with an osteopath or chiropractor. A 2001 investigation found that spinal manipulation is as effective as first-line prescription medications for migraine. In addition, massage to relax painful, knotted neck muscles can be beneficial.

A 2001 review of studies of acupuncture concluded that acupuncture has value for the treatment of migraine headaches where the cause is not apparent. It is thought that acupuncture induces analgesia by inhibiting pain transmission at the spinal level and causing the release of opioids. Acupuncture has been shown to increase the blood flow and supply of oxygen to the brain.

Regular physical activity and stress management can be very significant in preventing migraine. Take steps to replace anger with positive attitudes, and have as much rest and relaxation as possible. (For stress reduction, see ‘How to Train Your Mind for Success’ in this issue.)

For childhood migraine, University of Kentucky researchers concluded that relaxation therapies, such as progressive relaxation, self-hypnosis and guided imagery, can be as effective as, or more effective than, beta-blocking medication. They added that an important consideration is preparing children to deal with future headaches and allowing them to feel in control of their health. These behavioural therapies have the potential to do this.

Finally, what is the remedy for migraine proposed by Singer and Grismaijer whose theory of the cause was given at the end of the previous section? In short, their recommendation is for the sufferer to raise their head when in bed. In a 3-month study of 96 people, of whom 52 elevated their bodies so that their head was 20 to 30 cms higher than usual, and 44 were control subjects, 70% of the 52 reported improvement, and of these 30% ceased having migraines altogether. Among the controls, 43 of the 44 experienced no change. The elevation was achieved by keeping the legs horizontal and placing a foam wedge or sleeping bags under the mattress supporting the trunk and head.
Other Kinds of Headache

TENSION HEADACHES

Tension headaches are not incapacitating the way migraine headaches are. If your head feels as if it is being squeezed unbearably by a very tight band or crushed by a heavy weight on the top of the head or the crown or at the base of the skull, it's probably a tension headache. These affect nearly everyone at some time or other. Tension headaches can occur either in bouts or in a chronic form.

Tense, knotted neck muscles pull on already stiff joints in the upper neck and precipitate the headache.

The cause is a combination of mental and physical stresses. Those occurring in bouts or 'episodes' are typically a response to stresses such as anxiety, depression, emotional conflicts, fatigue or repressed hostility. The chronic form is likely to be associated with ongoing anxiety and/or depression.

These headaches are more likely to occur in highly competitive perfectionists who work hard, relax too little and worry too much. The person is unable to relax the scalp, face and neck muscles and the result is a dull aching pain. These muscles can also tighten when the person is feeling angry, frustrated, anxious or guilty.

Localised stress in the neck can be caused by bending over a desk, typewriter or kitchen sink for long periods, which can put enormous strain on neck muscles.

Interestingly, tension headaches can be associated with nutrition. The Department of Neurosciences, University of Turin, Italy, reported in 2002 that susceptibility to certain foods could be as significant with tension headache sufferers as with migraine sufferers.

The foods that they most commonly reported as triggers for both types of headache are alcoholic drinks, chocolate and cheese.

The prevention of tension headaches lies in relaxing the neck, shoulders and head, as well as the whole body. First and foremost, try to avoid getting 'uptight' about things. Easier said than done, of course, but we can learn to become much more positive in outlook. Effective guidelines for this are given in the Natural Health Society's book, The Man Who Lived in Three Centuries, available from the Society's bookshop.

Regularly practice relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, the playing of relaxation tapes, or relaxation exercises. Give yourself at least 15 minutes, or preferably 30 minutes, of peace and quiet every day.

Physical activity is a great tension breaker. Regular walking, jogging or swimming helps prevent tension in the neck and shoulder muscles.

Never sit in the one position for more than half-an-hour at a time. For one minute, walk, stretch, swing your arms, rotate your head to left then right, rotate your shoulders and finally clasp your hands behind your back and tilt your head back.

Try massaging the muscles of the scalp, neck and face. With the fingertips, gently feel the head for tight muscles and then massage them until they have relaxed. Also, briskly massage the whole of the scalp as if you are washing the hair. Then gently pull the hair all over the head - provided it is firmly rooted.

Have a warm shower or bath or try a hot water bottle on the back of your neck.

Tension headaches can respond to aromatherapy, particularly with oil of lavender. Place one or two drops of essential oil of lavender on the tips of your fingers and massage in a circular motion across your temples, behind the ears and across the back of the neck.

(Keep well away from eyes.)

The herbs, valerian and chamomile, are sedative and help reduce tension and anxiety. With valerian, pour a cup of boiling water onto 2 teaspoons of the root and infuse for 15 minutes. Drink before going to bed.

Acupuncture has been found, as with migraine headaches, to be effective for tension headaches, although one study questioned this.

Homeopathy, as prescribed by a practitioner, and the massaging of acupressure points can be effective. An easy point to locate is inside the base of the 'V' formed between the bones of the thumb and the hand in line with the first index finger.

If headaches are an ongoing problem, consult an osteopath or chiropractor to investigate spinal misalignment.

SINUS HEADACHES

When the mucous membranes lining the sinus cavities under the cheeks, nose and forehead become inflamed and swollen and produce excess mucus, the drainage passages may become blocked. The resulting pressure in the cavities commonly leads to headache.

The underlying cause of the headache is whatever caused the sinusitis in the first place. The Natural Health view is that the predominant dietary causes of mucous congestion are dairy products, excessive wheat-flour products (bread, pasta, breakfast cereal, cakes, pastries, etc.), which are also prominent in migraine, and also excessive sugar. In sensitive people, these foods are thought to cause the mucous membranes to copiously secrete mucus, as do certain allergenic substances. Another possible cause of sinus trouble is tooth infections.

For the prevention of these headaches, test for susceptibility to these foods by temporarily avoiding dairy products and all wheat and grain products. Allow the body to decongest the mucous membranes by adopting a fruit juice diet, or whole fruit exclusively, for a couple of days, before which time professional supervision would be necessary.

Consuming very moderate amounts of onion or garlic (though not on an empty stomach) is usually beneficial. During the acute phase of sinusitis, steam inhalation may provide considerable relief. Drainage of the sinuses can be promoted by massage over the sinuses and thumb pressure on specific pressure points by a practitioner.

ALLERGIES AND FOOD SENSITIVITIES

Non-migraine headaches can, according to the Dept of Clinical Neurosciences, University of Calgary, be triggered/cause by a wide range of medications and other substances, including prescribed medications, over-the-counter medications, illicit drugs, anaesthetic agents, foods, food additives, beverages, vitamins, minerals, pesticides and several others.

Regarding tyramine, a very recent 2003 study concluded that food amines are not, after all, associated with headache or other symptoms of food intolerance.

In general, intolerance of food additives leading to headaches is rare, typically affecting only 1 in 4000 headache sufferers.

The consumption of significant amounts of MSG (monosodium glutamate) may produce 'Chinese Food Syndrome', in which headaches are prominent.

Prevention lies in avoiding foods containing added MSG. Unfortunately, MSG in packaged food may be difficult to detect because the words 'natural flavour', 'flavouring' or 'hydrolysed vegetable protein (HVP)' may all refer to MSG.
Allergies and sensitivities may cause headaches directly or by triggering sinusitis. The Natural Health view of allergy is that the body is highly congested and super-sensitive to some extra irritant, such as a particular component of dairy products, the gluten in wheat, dust, fur, pollen or household chemicals. The approach is basically the same as for sinusitis – lower the level of toxic wastes in the body through nutritional cleansing in order to desensitise the mucous membranes. To deal with the particular foods or substances causing allergies, the usual approach is to use an elimination diet to identify the offending substances, then employ dietary rotation and avoidance of these substances. A standard four-day rotation diet means that where there is sensitivity to members of a particular family of foods, no food in that family should be consumed more than once in any four-day period. Or the rotation period could be two days or three days, etc.

It is astonishing to discover just how reluctant people can be to help themselves. A New York study found that three-quarters of a group of headache sufferers were aware of the food/substance causes of their headaches, yet less than half were informed of the food-headache connection by their medical practitioner. Even in those sufferers who were aware, many made no changes to their eating habits. [99]

**HIGH AND LOW BLOOD PRESSURE**

Headache can be a symptom of both high blood pressure and low blood pressure. How to lower high blood pressure (hypertension) was explained in the Spring 2000 issue of *New Vegetarian and Natural Health* magazine. Back issues are available from the Natural Health Society.

**THE PILL**

Use of the contraceptive pill has been associated with a number of side-effects, including depression, insomnia and headaches. Neurologists urge women who develop headaches after starting The Pill, or whose headaches become more severe, to stop taking the Pill immediately, as there are dangers, including a greater risk of stroke.

Oral contraceptives can influence a number of nutrients. Long-term usage can induce deficiencies of folic acid (vitamin B9) and vitamin B12. The Pill can reduce blood levels of tryptophan so that less serotonin is produced and the result can be headache. [99]

Natural methods of contraception are available.

**OTHER CAUSES OF HEADACHE**

There are still other possible causes of non-migraine headaches, some minor and some serious, for example, air pollution, stuffy rooms, eye strain, noise, over-exertion, lifting heavy weights, unusual bending and stooping, overwork, female hormone imbalances, etc. Caffeine withdrawal is notorious for causing headaches.

Alcohol hangover headaches are usually easily identified. The hangover results not only from the alcohol itself, which dilates blood vessels in the head, but also from colouring and flavouring elements formed during fermentation. Brandy, whisky, dark rum and many liqueurs contain them in greater quantities than do the clear spirits like gin and vodka. Alcohol depletes the body of vitamin B6 and dehydrates the brain, further contributing to headaches.

Headaches may be associated with a number of conditions such as glaucoma.

**DANGER SIGNALS**

It is strongly advisable to consult a practitioner immediately if there is abrupt onset of headache in a previously well person, with localised pain, visual disturbances (except in the case of migraine), signs of nerve problems, changes in the pain with change of position, and/or a change in the pattern of the headaches. A brain tumour should be checked for. Remember that in the vast majority of cases our worst fears don’t eventuate, nevertheless, don’t risk ignoring possible danger signals.
For Relief of Headaches in General

Just as natural health/natural therapies have been found to be effective for migraine headaches, the same researchers at the University of Exeter in the UK reported that these therapies are also effective for headaches in general. Reiterating, they are: aromatherapy, Bowen technique, chiropractic, hypnotherapy, massage, nutrition, reflexology, Reiki and yoga.¹⁶

For pregnant women suffering headaches, it has been found that physical exercise, relaxation and biofeedback can provide significant relief. Further, a second study found that two-thirds of the women using these techniques had maintained significant improvements up to one year after giving birth.²¹

With childhood headache, non-drug methods have been found to be effective. Strategies described by the School of Nursing, University of Mississippi, are, first and foremost, reassure the child that they will soon recover, provide plenty of rest, take them through relaxation exercises and care for them at home if at all possible.²²

Homeopathy, often employed for migraine, has been found to be effective in one study but not in another.²³ However, the individual sufferer will no doubt draw their own conclusions with this relatively safe therapy.

Because the individual who is using self-help methods as a first line of attack may not know the cause of his/her headaches, it is possible to work through a number of safe and simple techniques until one is found which brings relief. As no drugs or other toxic substances are involved with natural methods, side-effects are normally not a problem. Provided the method is properly used, even if it does not bring relief, it may bring benefit in other ways. The remainder of this article is an outline of some such techniques.

LIGHTEN THE LOAD ON YOUR LIVER

Reduce the overwork of the liver, as explained above for migraine headaches. Nutritional ‘cleansing’ under profession supervision can bring rapid improvement.

The invaluable vitamin C, found abundantly in fresh vegetables and fruits is an excellent detoxifier.

WATER TREATMENT (HYDROTHERAPY)

There are several combinations using hot and cold water which bring relief. Try them and see which one works best for you.

- A cold compress on the forehead and a hot water bottle applied to the back of the neck. The compress consists of a cold, moist piece of cotton sheeting wrung out lightly and placed over the forehead, and completely covered (every single square centimetre!) by a piece of woollen material — an old pullover or strip of old blanket will do, but the material must be wool.

- Try the reverse of the above with the cold compress on the back of the neck and the hot water bottle on the forehead.

- Place a cold compress right around the head, covering the forehead and part of the ears, for 20 minutes or more. At the same time, place a 20-cm wide compress around the waist to prevent more toxins being drawn to the head. This can be very effective.

- Cold compresses around the head and waist, and place the feet, hands and arms in hot water.

- For tension headaches or where arthritis of the neck and shoulders may be a factor, and the area is not feverish, place hot fomentations over the shoulders and back of the neck.

- For headaches due to stomach and liver upset, place hot fomentations over the abdominal region, for convenience on retiring to bed. Wiring out a towel in hot water and place over the area, covered by a hot water bottle to maintain heat, then a couple of dry towels or wool over this to retain the heat.

- Where the headache is congestive, being accompanied by a feeling of fullness in the head, simply use a hot footbath for about half-an-hour. Gradually increase the temperature of the water, and finish by dipping the feet in cold water for one minute.

HYDROTHERAPY FOR CONSTIPATION

Constipation is a major cause of numerous health problems, including liver congestion and headaches.

- Enemas. There is no quicker way of clearing the bowel. Available from most chemists, the equipment enables warm water to be injected into the bowel, the quantity of water being between half a litre and two litres at a time, depending on what the individual can hold. When inserting the nozzle (which should be lubricated with vaseline), take great care not to damage the tender tissue of the anus. Do not use pressure of any kind.

- Sitz baths. Very effective for relieving headaches associated with bowel or liver congestion. Sit in a tub (such as a baby’s bath) of cold water up to your navel, and massage your abdomen with a wet washer in the direction of the bowel, which is clockwise looking down at your own stomach. Do this for five minutes, perhaps morning and evening, but only on an empty stomach. You must be very warm to start with (do some sweeping!), and warmly clothed on your top half and legs and feet during the bath.

INDUCE VOMITING IF APPROPRIATE

If the stomach is uncomfortable with undigested fermenting food, try to induce vomiting.

NECK RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

- Relax your neck muscles by gently kneading them with your fingers, or have professional massage.

- Try the following neck-muscle stretching technique for either a stiff neck or tension. Turn your head to the right as far as is comfortable without producing pain. Take a couple of deep breaths, then turn your head a little further. Repeat this procedure to the left. If there is stiffness in one direction, say to the right, turn your head to the right and place your left hand on the left side of your face. With no more than half the strength available in your neck muscles, try to turn your head to the front again, while resisting with the left hand. Relax after about ten seconds. Now take a deep breath and turn your head further to the right. Then repeat the process of resisting with the hand.

- Tilt the head sideways to the left and then to the right, as though trying to lay the head on the shoulder. If there is restriction, use the method described above to release the area, always using neck muscles to pull the head towards the neutral position.
Apply the same procedure for tilting the head forwards and backwards.

Have the neck checked by an osteopath or chiropractor, as spinal misalignment is very common and can cause a great deal of trouble, especially headaches.

Check that your head is properly supported when you lie in bed. Neck strain can be caused if the pillow supports only the top of the head or is too high or too low. For most comfort, try having the thicker part of the pillow under your neck.

**LYMPH DRAINAGE**

Manually-applied lymph drainage can be helpful in preventing headaches. The feather-light technique, developed by Jill Griffiths of Melbourne, is designed to enhance lymphatic fluid movement. This can relax muscles, stimulate blood flow and detoxification and reduce inflammation. It cannot be applied during the headache, but before and afterwards only. The feather-light technique is demonstrated in a video,[3] which is reviewed in the Natural Health Society Bookshop pages in this issue.

**CHECK YOUR JAW**

Misalignment of the jaw can have profoundly adverse effects, including headaches. Correction will require the services of a skilled dentist who is aware of the importance of jaw joint alignment.

**CHECK FOR EYE STRAIN**

If your headaches come on after reading or watching television, check for eye strain. Rather than rushing into wearing glasses, you could investigate natural vision improvement. (Refer to ‘Revive Your Eyes With Exercise’, NVNH Summer 1999/2000 – copies are available.)

**TAKING A BRISK WALK**

Provided there is no hypoglycaemia, gentle brisk exercise will often relieve a headache caused by tension or stuffy air. Regular exercise is a good preventative for most kinds of headache. Be sure to wear well-cushioned training shoes, and walk or run on grass. Exercises such as yoga and tai chi are also recommended.

**RED CLOVER TEA**

Drinking a cup of red clover tea or catnip tea at the onset of the headache may help.

**IF NECESSARY, TAKE A HOLIDAY**

Where your headache is due to nerve strain or over-work, ensure adequate sleep. You may need to think about taking a holiday for a complete rest.

**CALCIUM-MAGNESIUM SUPPLEMENTATION**

Calcium is one of the most powerful natural painkillers, and, if all else fails, supplementation may be worth trying. Calcium gluconate, always in combination with magnesium and possibly Vitamin D, is recommended by the naturopath who wrote Headaches and Migraine.[1]

**REGULARLY PRACTISE A RELAXATION TECHNIQUE**

There are many techniques available for learning to relax or to cope with stress so that it doesn’t get you down. Prominent on the list are yoga, the many forms of meditation, stress management courses and physical activity. And be philosophical – worry only about those things you can do something about, and forget all the rest! NVNH

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**REFERENCES**

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7. Jerusalinsky R et al, Arch Neuropsiqiatr, 2001 Sep; 603-4: 609-12
15. Young WB et al, Semin Neurol, 1997; 17(4): 325-33
33. Video, Lymphatic Cleansing for the Face Plus the 6 Minute Cellulite Treatment, produced by the Wellier Institute (see NHS Shop this issue)