



Leaflet: Migraine and Diet

MIGRAINE AND DIET

In many people with migraine there is no relationship to food. However, it is well known that chocolate, cheese and red wine can bring on or 'trigger' migraine attacks in some people. Less well known is that other foods may also be responsible, particularly those containing a substance called tyramine. One or more foods from the following list may be associated with migraine attacks in some people. This list is not comprehensive and other foods may also be associated with migraine in a small number of people:

cheese, beers, broad beans, eggs, pickled herrings, wine (mainly red), avocados, coffee, chocolate, tomatoes, spinach, tea, beef and liver, canned meats, prunes, marmite, some sausages, salami, oranges, other yeast extracts, hung game, bananas, figs, mild products, soy sauce, plums, pepperoni, potatoes.

There are two ways in which food may contribute to migraine.

Build up effect . If migraine attacks are associated with a particular food, it does not necessarily mean that each time it is eaten a migraine attack will occur. More commonly the food is thought to build up in the body. A migraine may result when it reaches a 'critical' level. This is more likely if another 'trigger factor' is present such as stress, tiredness or a menstrual period. If no other trigger factor is present then a higher level of the food may be needed before an attack occurs. In these people, total abstinence from the food is not needed. However, being aware of this may avoid over-indulgence in suspected foods. It would also be best to avoid them when other possible trigger factors are present. For example, a certain amount of wine may be OK while relaxed on holiday but not after a stressful day at work or taken with cheese.

Food triggers . In some people even small amounts of some foods may trigger a migraine. Totally avoiding certain foods sometimes makes a big difference in such people. If a certain food is suspected as a trigger then it may be worth avoiding it for several weeks to test the theory. If the number of migraine attacks decreases it might then be worthwhile deliberately taking a small amount of the food to see if a migraine attack occurs. This would then be reasonable proof of a true food trigger and the food can then be avoided.

Lack of food. Some people find that lack of food is a trigger. Allowing intervals between food to be no longer than 4 hours during the day or 13 hours overnight may be helpful.

Some people who have frequent and distressing migraine may be unsure if a food (or lack of food for several hours) is contributing. It may be worth keeping a food diary of every food and drink taken and time periods between meals and snacks to see if any pattern emerges.

If no pattern emerges, as a last resort it may be worthwhile going on a very restricted diet. For example, a bland diet of just fish, lamb, pears and some vegetables can be started with. Then gradually re-introduce new foods until a possible food trigger is found. This is a long and tedious process but some people have claimed success in controlling their migraine by identifying food triggers and then avoiding them.

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