Lifestyle Factors in Migraine

Dr. Jason C. Ray

What are lifestyle factors?

There are a number of lifestyle factors that for many people, have been found to have an impact on your experience or frequency with migraine. Having more lifestyle factors working for you, rather than against you can impact the frequency of your migraines. Nothing is a panacea however, and it is important to recognise that a migraine may occur despite 'doing the right things', and an individual factor may trigger a migraine on one day but not another.

Diet

The traditional idea of a specific 'food trigger' is more complicated than once thought, as the earliest phase and symptoms of a migraine may include food cravings – leading you to eat – and then blame the eventual migraine – on a particular food. This being said, if in keeping a diary you recognise a particular food is often triggering your migraines, avoiding the food and performing your own experiment is logical.

One important factor in our diet appears to be avoiding long periods of fasting, and dehydration. There is limited evidence of dietary therapies in migraine, however a healthy diet with fruit and vegetable, and limited highly processed foods is thought to be helpful. One study suggested a diet rich in omega-3 foods such as flaxseed and fish may help the frequency of attacks.

Caffeine

Caffeine is a commonly reported migraine trigger, however the relationship with headache is complex. In small doses, it may help provide relief from pain, and can be found in some combination analgesic options. More frequently caffeine intake can impact your headache frequency, partly directly, and partly as it can act as a diuretic and promote dehydration.

If you have infrequent attacks, limiting your caffeine intake to one to two drinks per day (200mg caffeine), or considering ceasing caffeine entirely if you have daily headaches may be helpful. If you withdraw quickly from daily caffeine, it can lead to withdrawal headaches, and gradual reduction may be better tolerated.

Exercise

Aerobic exercise has good evidence that it is helpful at reducing the frequency of headaches. This can be a challenging lifestyle change for a number of reasons, most importantly is that when migraines are more frequent, physical activity can worsen the pain during an attack. In this setting, it is often easier to try and find an enjoyable activity that you can slowly increase as your headaches improve from other preventative therapies.

© Dr. Jason C. Ray 2023

Optimise your ergonomics

This can mean different things for different people. In the case of office work or study, paying attention to your posture at the desk, taking frequent breaks, resting your eyes and stretching may be important factors. Ensuring that your pillow and bed is comfortable can also be important.

Managing Stress

Stress is an inescapable part of life, but it is also important to recognise that going through periods of higher stress, and also the period immediately after, may be associated with an increase in your migraines. Partly, this is important to know to give yourself more space and time in these periods, however meditative or relaxing activities (whatever this means for you) that help relax can all be helpful – be it yoga, exercise, reading, or music.

Sleep

Sleep can be helpful at reducing pain, and people find they wake up with the pain of a migraine resolved. While this is helpful, it is important to monitor your sleep cycle, as excess amount of time in bed during the day can cause issues with sleeping at night. Good sleep habits in general can be helpful in reducing headache related pain. Some strategies include:

- Have a regular bedtime and wake time, and don't deviate more than 60 minutes from this
- Make your bed only for sleep – avoid using electronic devices and napping
- Store electronic devices outside the bedroom to avoid using them overnight
- Maintain a bedtime routine to tell your body it is time to fall asleep. It can be helpful to avoid electronic devices for 2 hours before bed, and caffeine after midday if you have issues falling asleep.
- Make time to wind down (without your phone!) for 20 to 30 minutes before bed.

Avoid known triggers

Everyone is different, and it is relatively rare that a single factor acts as a definite trigger every single time, however where you find a trend for a migraine trigger, it is wise to avoid it wherever possible.

© Dr. Jason C. Ray 2023