

## Migraine

Written by sdg98ijhADF1

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**Today marks the start of Migraine Awareness Week 2012. More prevalent than diabetes, epilepsy and asthma combined, migraine affects over 8 million people in the UK and brings excruciating pain to 190,000 sufferers every day. For most people the only solution when a migraine attack occurs is prescription painkillers but over the course of the week we'll be looking at foods, nutrients and lifestyle changes which can help to prevent migraine, or maybe even stop them altogether.**



Hopefully, unlike me, you've never experienced that moment of sheer dread and panic when you lose your peripheral vision, people's faces seem to mysteriously disappear and everything around you is replaced with a curtain of zigzags and sparkly dots. It may sound like a drug-induced high but a salute to the psychedelic 60's this isn't - for an unlucky few this is the precursor to a migraine.

In my case I tend to pull a rather strange facial expression as I try to determine if I'm losing my vision (not unlike that startled expression and tilted head dogs give after hearing a dog whistle!) which those around me find utterly bizarre. It's at this point I reach for my trusty cocktail of medication to stave off what will likely be an excruciating next few hours.

Now of course, I'm a nutritionist and have never been a fan of popping pills for anything, always preferring a more natural approach, but do admit that what can't be classified as my natural approach is just sheer stubbornness on my part. However, I have learnt to my detriment that a "grin and bear it" attitude doesn't quite cut it with migraine. Indeed there are many medical conditions where prescription medications are absolutely necessary and even life-saving - I certainly won't dispute that. There are however, a huge number of medical conditions and illnesses where, despite medications being necessary, dietary changes and nutritional supplementation can significantly help reduce the dependency on medications and may even negate the need for them entirely. This is certainly true of migraine and over the course of the week we'll be taking a look at migraine in more detail, looking at which foods can help and

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hinder the condition, the role nutritional supplements can play and the small changes in lifestyle that can make a big difference. But first a little background...

## What is Migraine?

Migraine is a pretty complicated neurological condition which affects around 15% of adults in the UK. Unlike mild headaches which many people experience, migraine is accompanied by some particularly distinct symptoms which are often quite severe and can include

- A painful headache on one side of the head (often behind one eye)
- Disturbed vision
- Becoming extremely sensitive to light, noise and smells
- Feeling sick (nausea)
- Vomiting

Some people who suffer from migraines may also have difficulty speaking during an attack, experience a pins and needles sensation in their arms and legs, suffer abdominal pain and may appear to be very confused. This can all seem very frightening at the time but these symptoms usually subside after the migraine attack. It is however, not uncommon to feel a little groggy and tired for a few days following a migraine.

Only about a third of migraine sufferers experience the disturbed (zigzag) vision before the headache and this is known as migraine with aura. If your vision is badly affected make sure you take yourself out of harms way by pulling over if you're driving for example.

Everyone experiences migraines differently and with varying severity. Some people may suffer a migraine several times a week while others may go months or even years without an attack.

## What Causes Migraine?

This is perhaps the trickiest part to answer as despite migraine being the most common neurological condition in the western world we still aren't one hundred percent sure what causes them to happen and as yet, there is still no cure. That's not to say however that we know nothing about them. Migraines appear to be intimately linked with changes in hormones, and serotonin in particular seems to play a significant part. Some researchers believe that a drop in serotonin levels causes blood vessels in the brain to spasm, making them significantly narrower and this is what's believed to cause the aura and visual disturbances some people experience. Following this the blood vessels dilate (widen) and this is what's believed to cause the pain of migraine. What causes the initial drop in serotonin is not yet fully understood but the link to hormones is particularly evident in women, many of whom experience regular migraines prior to their period when levels of another hormone, oestrogen, drop. Many people are genetically

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predisposed to migraine too and they may be common among several members of the same family.

## What You Can Do To Prevent Migraine



There may be no cure for migraine yet but the old adage 'prevention is better than cure' really does ring true here and anything which is proven to help prevent migraine from occurring in the first place will undoubtedly be welcomed by those who suffer from them (myself included).

Remember, even though the foods, nutritional supplements and lifestyle changes we'll be looking at through the course of the week have a good track record in preventing migraine they are still no substitute for an effective painkiller if you should suffer an attack. For this reason it's always a good idea to carry painkillers or any prescription migraine medicines with you at all times. These may include, paracetamol, aspirin, ibuprofen, codeine or special prescription medicines from a family of drugs known as 'Triptans' for example. It may take some time to determine which painkiller(s) work best for you and you should consult a doctor or pharmacist if you are unsure. Remember that over-the-counter (OTC) drugs such as ibuprofen and codeine in particular are very potent drugs and should be used at as lower dose and for as little time as possible and preferably taken with food. Although habit may see you throw it in the bin it is very important you read the patient information leaflet included with any medications you take!

### **TOMORROW: Migraine & Food**

**We'll be looking at which foods help and hinder migraine, what you should be eating more of and what you should be avoiding in order to stay migraine free.**

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**Important:** *If your headaches are severe and frequent make sure you check in with your doctor to confirm you are experiencing migraines. If you experience visual disturbances and pain in the eyes see your doctor immediately. If you're pregnant ensure you speak with a doctor before taking any over the counter or prescription medications or nutritional supplements. Headaches and visual disturbances during pregnancy can be a sign of pre-eclampsia, if this happens see a doctor immediately.*