

“What did I eat to cause this headache?”

Dawn A. Marcus

Almost half of headache sufferers report that fasting will trigger their headaches. Only a minority of people, however, can identify certain foods which, when eaten, trigger a headache. The most commonly reported food triggers are alcohol (33%) and chocolate (22%). Food additives, such as monosodium glutamate and aspartame, are also reported as headache triggers by 10% to 15% of people. Although the majority of headache sufferers cannot identify food triggers, headache patients are often given a broad recommendation to avoid eating any food that may contain possible headache triggering chemicals, such as tyramine (e.g., cheeses), beta-phenylethylamine (e.g., chocolate), and nitrates (e.g., processed meats).

Several research studies have proven that food avoidance does not improve chronic headaches. A study by Diamond and Medina compared headache activity when migraineurs followed two diets. One diet restricted patients from eating putative headache trigger foods. The other diet required patients to eat those same foods. Interestingly, headache activity improved on both diets. This suggests that a particular food is not likely to be a trigger, rather following a scheduled diet may be therapeutic. In other words, feeling that you have control over your headaches will improve your headaches.

Two studies have tested individual food items. A single study involving aspartame showed only a modest worsening of headache in subjects who consumed huge amounts of aspartame (the equivalent of 12 cans of diet cola or 32 packets of sweetener daily) for one month. Another study testing chocolate showed eating even large amounts

of chocolate didn't trigger headaches when patients couldn't tell if they were eating chocolate, even in patients who believed chocolate was a headache trigger for them.

If both clinical experience and research studies show that eating certain foods will not trigger headaches, why do patients and doctors believe that it is important to avoid eating certain foods? Unfortunately, it is very difficult for both patients and doctors to determine why headaches occur at certain times and not others. In some cases, there may be a number of possible headache trigger factors. Patients then need to sort out which trigger factor was the important one. For example, you may have a hectic day at work, missing lunch. Late in the afternoon, you feel weak and stressed. So you grab a chocolate bar from the vending machine to eat as you race through the rest of your day. So what triggered your headache? Was it the chocolate, or rather fasting and stress? In addition, chocolate craving often occurs with menstrual periods, another common headache trigger. Finally, chocolate craving may be part of a preheadache prodrome. When you satisfy that craving, you may falsely blame the headache on the chocolate.

“What should I do about my diet?”

Fasting is a headache trigger and should be avoided. Regular meals should be eaten throughout the day, including breakfast. It may also be helpful to follow a headache restrictive diet for a brief time. Limit your foods for four weeks. If there is no change in headache, then, like for most headache sufferers, foods are not a trigger for you. Then when you visit your mother-in-law who announces, “I made a delicious double chocolate cake, but you can't have any or you'll get a headache,” you can quip back, “I tested foods and they don't trigger my headache, so give me an extra helping!” If you are one of those

rare people in whom headaches do improve, you can add foods back into your diet one at a time to see which foods may trigger your headache. Eating a certain food should trigger a headache within 12 hours. Then you can limit those few foods to which you are sensitive. You should never restrict all possible trigger foods for a long time. This is not likely to be helpful, and too much concern about avoiding foods may be another stress, as well as decrease your enjoyment of mealtime.

Restrictive diets should never be followed if you are pregnant. These diets are not likely to be helpful, and may prevent adequate nutrition during pregnancy because of the wide variety of calcium-rich and vitamin-rich foods that are restricted. These diets should also not be used in children and adolescents because of doubtful benefit and significant social disruption. Prohibiting the child from sharing a chocolate Easter basket with his siblings or the teenager from attending a pizza party can significantly add to the social stigma of having headaches.

So test your headaches and discover that foods, per se, are not a trigger for you. Then you won't need to worry about the ingredients of the dishes you eat. Start enjoying your foods again.