

Counterpoint: The Trigger Quagmire

Published in ACHE newsletter

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The last two decades have greatly expanded knowledge about the mechanisms behind common headaches, like migraine. Although we now understand very well the interactions between brain chemistry and headache, a great mystery still remains: Why do headache episodes occur at particular times and not others?

Patients are often asked to carefully record headaches and trigger exposure to identify important links for their own headaches. Unfortunately, a wide variety of internal and external factors may be responsible for headaches, only some of which can be identified and modified by the headache sufferer. Controlled research studies that have tested the effects of presumed dietary triggers such as chocolate on headache occurrence have failed to show a link, even in patients who were convinced that foods were triggers before study participation.

Using the example of a food as a trigger, we can see the problems with trigger identification. Mary, a migraine sufferer, gets a chocolate bar out of the office candy machine on Thursday afternoon. That night, she has a bad headache and blames the chocolate. Two weeks later, she has a Mexican dish with a chocolate sauce and doesn't have a headache for another 5 days. If chocolate is a trigger, why did she have a headache one time and not the other? The first question to ask is: Why did Mary eat that chocolate bar? Was she having sweet cravings because she was under stress or premenstrual? Did she forget to eat lunch? Sometimes patients have sweet cravings during the hours before a migraine as part of a migraine prodrome, similar to cravings that occur premenstrually for many women. So was the chocolate a trigger, or was it a response to other powerful triggers (hormone changes, stress or fasting), or a sign of a migraine already in progress? Unfortunately, we really don't know the answers to these questions.

So what should the headache sufferer do?

1. Minimize time spent trying to identify why a headache occurs on any particular day. This exercise can be frustrating and time consuming, and you can never be aware of all of the body chemistry changes that may be influencing your headaches.
2. Adopt a healthy lifestyle. Maintain good, regular life habits, including regular sleeping and meal patterns.
3. Identify changes in headaches that occur after you start new medications, as headache is a very common side effect for medications that treat a variety of health problems.
4. Learn coping techniques to reduce the body's natural reaction to stress, such as stress management skills.
5. If you believe foods may be a trigger, eliminate possible trigger foods for 3 weeks. If your headaches improve, add foods back one at a time to see if a headache occurs consistently within 12 hours of eating the food. Remember that

most patients do get headache improvement from any structured diet, possibly because they are eating more regular meals.

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