Diet and Controlling Your Migraine

You may have noticed that you’re more likely to get a migraine headache after you have certain foods or beverages. Research shows that this happens in up to 44 percent of people with migraine. Knowing which foods trigger your attacks may help you manage your migraine disease.

Identifying Your Triggers

Many people find they can reduce the frequency of their attacks by identifying and avoiding triggers. Migraine can be triggered by a number of things in addition to foods, such as light, noise, odors, and hormones.

Keep a Diary

A good way to identify your triggers is by keeping a diary that tracks:

• when the headaches and other symptoms occur
• what trigger you were exposed to in the 24 hours before the migraine started
• how long it lasted
• how severe the attack was

Keeping a diary helps you identify patterns. For instance, you may find that you get a migraine when: you’re ovulating, there’s severe weather, or you drink red wine.

The Association of Migraine Disorders (AMD) offers a diary you can use to help identify your triggers. If you use a smartphone, you may find it convenient to use one of the free or low-cost apps that enable you to track migraine and triggers on your phone.

How Triggers Work

There are a number of theories about why some foods trigger migraine including:

• Antibodies that cause allergic reactions may be responsible.
• Some foods cause blood vessels in the brain to constrict, which causes an attack.
• Migraine may be the result of your body defending itself against unstable molecules called free radicals that can damage healthy cells.

The bottom line? Research is ongoing, but at this time, it’s not fully understood why certain foods or beverages trigger migraine in some people.
Common Food & Beverage Triggers

Food Additives
- monosodium glutamate (MSG), often in Asian foods and meat tenderizers
- artificial sweeteners, especially aspartame
- nitrates, often found in bacon, ham, and hot dogs
- yellow dye #6, found in some processed foods
- tyramine
- Brewer’s yeast

Caffeine
including coffee, many teas, colas, and chocolate

Ripened Cheeses
such as cheddar, brie, and camembert

Alcohol
red wine and beer are the most common culprits

Nuts and Seeds

Aged, Fermented, and Pickled Foods
such as sauerkraut, pickles, olives, soy sauce, miso, and salami

Cultured Dairy Products
including yogurt, buttermilk, and sour cream

Very Cold Foods
cold foods and beverages, such as ice cream or frozen beverages

Facts to Keep in Mind
- Most people have several triggers.
- Sometimes a trigger is not just one thing, but a combination of factors.
- Triggers are different with each person.
- Triggers may not always affect you. Food that triggered your migraine attack last month might be eaten with no ill effect this month.
- Your triggers can change over time.
You’ve Identified Triggers: What’s Next?

After you’ve identified foods that contribute to your migraine disease, you have several options:

• Eliminate the trigger for several months and see if you don’t have migraine or have fewer of them. If your migraine attacks start again after adding it back into your diet, it’s something to avoid.

• Avoid the trigger at times when you’re also exposed to environmental, situational, or hormonal triggers.

• Avoid the trigger entirely.

A Common-Sense Approach

Medical experts recommend using common sense when avoiding triggers. If, for instance, you believe aged cheddar cheese sets off your attacks, it doesn’t mean you can never eat it again.

Occasionally, eating a small piece of cheddar cheese may be just fine. You may want to avoid problem foods when other triggers are present. For instance, you might avoid eating cheddar cheese when you’re especially stressed. Also, over time you may find that cheddar cheese no longer triggers your migraine.

Migraine-Friendly Foods

Food shopping when you live with migraine disease can be a daunting task. To ease this stress, AMD has a migraine-friendly food menu and shopping list.

Don’t Skip Meals

It can be helpful to avoid food triggers, but don’t skip meals. The longer the time between meals, the more your blood sugar increases. Elevated blood sugar is a common migraine trigger.