Migraines

How healthy habits can help your head

Headaches usually go away on their own. Other times, they may fade with medications, ice packs or rest. But sometimes, as with migraines, they simply don’t go away.

Why are migraines so persistent? Specific causes are unknown, but stress and certain foods seem to play a role. Build healthy habits around stress and food and your next nasty pain in the noggin might become a distant memory.

What stresses you out?

Stress is part of everyday life, as unavoidable as traffic, bills and ringing telephones. Chronic stress puts wear and tear on your body. Not to mention your mind.

Stress and headaches can be managed. In fact, coping with stress and actively practicing relaxation may reduce your migraines and headaches.

Try these stress-busting strategies for headache relief:

- **Know what stresses you.** Is it money? Or work? Your health, family or relationships? Different people stress over different things, so finding the source of yours often takes some self-reflection.

- **Take a break.** Stress can feel like a runaway treadmill; every time you run a little faster, the treadmill speeds up. Taking a break is not a luxury, it’s a physical necessity.

- **Test your assumptions.** Instead of gloom-and-doom scenarios, focus on your skills and resources that can help get you through.

- **Pay attention to what you tell yourself.** In the middle of a terrible headache, you may convince yourself the pain will never go away. When you spot a negative thought pattern, try replacing it with positive statements. “All of my other headaches went away. This one will too.”

- **Take control.** You may have more control over stress than you think. Addressing problems head on, look for new options or learn to put up with a situation you can’t change.

Most people know they need to reduce stress; they may even know how. Yet most people don’t do anything about it. If stress is interfering with your life, reach out for help. Talk to your doctor to build a treatment plan.
How can food help your headaches?

Changes in eating habits alone can’t cure a headache. But getting more of some foods and less of others may help ease your symptoms. At the very least, it could help you have fewer, shorter migraines. Here are some mealtime tips:

- **Schedule regular healthy meals each day.** Try to eat your meals at the same time each day. Skipping meals can cause your blood sugar to go up and down – that might trigger a migraine.

- **Avoid caffeine and alcohol.** These tend not only to trigger migraines, but also might make them worse. Watch out for hidden sources of caffeine, such as chocolate, sodas and over-the-counter pain relievers.

- **Cut out potential trigger foods and reintroduce them slowly, one at a time.** This will show you which foods you need to avoid completely. Common triggers include cheese, nuts, peanut butter, onions, dairy products, MSG, pickled foods, fermented foods, avocado, banana, citrus, nitrates and the amino acid tyramine. If any specific foods provoke a migraine, remove that food from your diet.

How do you know what food might be a trigger? By tracking your headaches in a headache diary. If you have other symptoms like light sensitivity, nausea, vomiting or dizziness, you should talk to your doctor right away.

Information for this article was found in WebMD’s Migraines & Headaches Health Center at webmd.com and The National Headache Foundation at headaches.org.