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for your employees
for your future
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WELLNESS WEEKLY

Headache Triggers

& Solutions



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Headache Trigger: Warm Weather

When the temperature climbs, so does the likelihood of developing a migraine or other severe headache. In a recent study, researchers found a 7.5% increase in headache risk for every 9 degrees F.

Headache Trigger: Poor Posture

You don't have to work up a sweat to build pressure in the head and neck muscles. Slouching at your desk will do the job, too. Common forms of poor posture include hunching your shoulders, using a chair with no lower-back support, staring at a monitor that is too low or too high, and cradling a phone between your ear and shoulder. If you have frequent tension headaches, take a good look at your workspace.

Headache Trigger: Cheese

One of the most common migraine triggers is aged cheese, including blue cheese, brie, cheddar, feta, mozzarella, parmesan, and Swiss. The culprit is a substance called tyramine, which forms when certain types of protein break down. The longer food ages, the more tyramine it contains.

Headache Trigger: Red Wine

Tyramine is also found in red wine and some liquors. Because alcohol increases blood flow to the brain, the effects may be even more intense.

Headache Trigger: Skipping Meals

Hunger headaches aren't always obvious. If you skip a meal, your head could start to ache before you realize you're hungry. The trouble is a dip in blood sugar. But don't try to cure a hunger headache with a candy bar. Sweets cause blood sugar to spike and then drop even lower.

Headache Trigger: Smoking

Smoking and secondhand smoke contain nicotine, which causes blood vessels in the brain to narrow. Giving up cigarettes or reducing exposure to secondhand smoke appears especially helpful to patients with cluster headaches. These are painful one-sided headaches that occur in groups.

Headache Trigger: Caffeine

In moderation, caffeine is often beneficial -- in fact, it's found in many headache medications. But chugging coffee can be a cause of headaches. If you're hooked on caffeine, cutting back abruptly may only make things worse, so take it slow.

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Headache Solution: Identify Triggers

If you can identify common triggers, you may be able to cut off headaches before they start. The best way to accomplish this is through a headache diary. Keep a daily log of foods you eat, stressful events, weather changes, and physical activity. Whenever you have a headache, record the time it starts and stops. This will help you find patterns, so you can try to avoid your personal triggers.

Headache Solution: Manage Stress

Many people are able to manage migraines or tension headaches through stress-busting strategies. Although you can't control the stressful events that come your way, you can alter your response to those events.

Headache Solution: Stretch Your Legs

Moderate exercise is a powerful stress reliever. Walking is a great choice because it delivers an extra defense against tension headaches. When you walk, the swinging motion of your arms tends to relax the muscles in your neck and shoulders. Breaking up those knots diminishes the very root of tension headaches.

Headache Solution: Eat Regular Meals

Eating balanced meals throughout the day will help keep your blood sugar on an even keel. Aim for meals and snacks that pair a protein with a complex carbohydrate such as peanut butter on whole-grain bread. And be sure to drink enough fluids -- dehydration is another common headache trigger.

When to See a Doctor

Any new headache that is unusually severe or lasts more than a couple of days should be checked by a doctor. It's also important to let your healthcare provider know if the pattern of your headaches changes or if you have a headache accompanied by paralysis, confusion, fever, or stiff neck, seek emergency medical care.