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Wellness Wednesday

Six Everyday Habits That Could Be Triggering Your Headaches

When you're suffering from headaches, it's easy for your mind to jump to a worst-case scenario. But while it is possible that recurring headaches can be due to something scary like a brain tumor, it's much more likely they result from something fairly innocent that you're doing and don't realize.

In general, headaches happen when the blood vessels, muscles and nerves in your head are over-stimulated, said Dr. Vernon Williams, a neurologist and director of the Center for Sports Neurology and Pain Medicine at Cedars-Sinai Kerlan-Jobe Institute in Los Angeles. "When these pain-sensitive structures become overactive, or when chemical activity in the brain is altered, we feel the uncomfortable sensations of a headache," he explained.

The triggers for everyone can be different, but there are a few lifestyle factors that routinely pop up. These are the biggies to keep on your radar:



1. You've been drinking red wine

Alcohol, and red wine in particular, can trigger headaches. Experts aren't 100 percent sure why this happens, but it may be due to change alcohol causes to your blood flow, said Dr. Amit Sachdev, an assistant professor and director of the Division of Neuromuscular Medicine at Michigan State University.

When you drink alcohol, it causes something known as vasodilation, which makes your peripheral blood vessels (the ones in your arms, hands, legs and feet) relax and let more blood flow through. That makes your blood pressure drop and, as a result, your heart rate increases to try to compensate.

That change in your blood flow can stimulate the nerves in your brain stem (the part of your brain that connects your cerebrum with your spinal cord), triggering headaches, said Dr. Daniel Franc, a neurologist at Providence Saint John's Health Center in Santa Monica, California. While any form of alcohol can do this, scientists have linked the tannins in red wine to an increased risk of headaches. But, Franc said, it's "an open question exactly why the tannins in wine help set off headaches."

If you notice that you get headaches after you drink even just small amounts, try to figure out whether it may be caused by a certain type of alcohol, like red wine, and stop drinking that. If your headaches go away, you've probably located your trigger. If they don't, try going without alcohol for a bit and seeing where that gets you.

2. You're eating a lot of processed meats

It seems weird that something as seemingly innocent as a turkey sandwich could be causing your head pain, but there's definitely a link, Sachdev said. It's largely due to the nitrates — preservatives added to meats to prevent the growth of harmful bacteria. Of course, plenty of people eat deli meat and hot dogs with no issues. But recent research has suggested that some people have bacteria in their mouths that can interact with the nitrates, causing high levels of the gas nitric oxide and triggering headaches. Nitrates are also linked to vasodilation, the same mechanism that can cause you to have a pounding headache after you drink alcohol.

3. You've had a change in sleep, or a lack of sleep

If you notice your headaches came on right around the same time you started sleeping less than usual, you may have found your trigger. "An abnormal sleep pattern or lack of sleep can definitely cause headaches," Franc said. In fact, research has found a direct correlation between a lack of rest and a pounding head; the worse sleep someone gets, the more likely they are to suffer from headaches. The reason why this happens isn't totally clear, but a lack of sleep can lower your pain threshold and stimulate the nerves in your brain stem, Franc said — and that can create the perfect storm for headaches.

Unfortunately, it's not always easy to get more or better sleep. But try to make it a priority if you can. (Here are some easy nighttime tricks that will help you get those Zs.) And, if you suspect that you're struggling with a sleep disorder, it's probably time to reach out to a sleep medicine specialist for help.

4. You're skipping meals

Sometimes a midday meeting gets in the way of lunch and, before you realize, it's dinnertime and the last meal you had was breakfast. But if you make this a regular habit, your head is going to protest. Skipping meals clearly makes you hungry but it can also cause dehydration, Williams explained — and both of those can lead to headaches. The lining of your brain has a protective mechanism that essentially gives a message that you need to take better care of yourself, Franc said.

5. You have bad posture

Your mom was right: You should try to stand up straight. When you slump down, it taxes the muscles in the back of your neck that, coincidentally, interact with the nerves that pull up from your cervical spine, Franc said. That can cause your neck muscles to spasm, irritating the nerves in the back of your head and triggering headaches.

"It really gets to the fact that pain in general is from a network of nerves and connective tissues," Franc explained. "If you disrupt those muscles and tissues, it will set off a network of nerves and cause pain." You can simply make a point to try to stand up straighter in an attempt to relieve your pain. Or, if that's a struggle, try meeting with a physical therapist for tips and exercises on how to make good posture more natural for you.

6. You're stressed out

Stress is the most common trigger for tension headaches, which causes mild to moderate pain that feels like a tight band around your head, according to the Mayo Clinic. While there's a definite link between stress and headaches, the mechanism behind it is a little less clear, Franc said. The biggest theory is that people who experience tension headaches simply have a higher-than-normal sensitivity to pain. And, when they become stressed, they physically feel it more.

Since being told you should stress less will probably just stress you out more, try incorporating proven stress-busting exercises and techniques into your daily life, like meditation and yoga. (And here's a lengthy list of tips for managing anxiety if those options aren't your thing.) If you're still struggling, it may be a good idea to check in with a mental health professional for advice on how to try to better manage your stress.

Again, everyone has different triggers for headaches. But the best way to stop headaches and keep them from returning is to figure out your triggers and do your best to avoid them. "Headaches can be debilitating at times, but understanding the causes may make it easier to find relief," Williams said.

This Week's Exercise

SIDE ELBOW PLANK WITH A TWIST



Let's Get Started

- 1.** Start in side elbow plank on your right side, with your feet stacked one on top of the other. Keep your weight on your right elbow with your fingers reaching away from your body. If you feel unstable with your feet stacked, stagger your feet by bringing your left foot in front of your right.
- 2.** Place your left arm behind your head, and inhale to prepare.
- 3.** Exhale, pull your navel to your spine engaging your deep abs, and bring your left elbow to your right hand twisting through your ribcage.
- 4.** Return to the starting position to complete one rep.
- 5.** Do 10 reps on each side to create a set. Do two to three sets.

Source: <https://bit.ly/2Kst6EC>

Regular exercise can help you control your weight, reduce your risk of heart disease, and strengthen your bones and muscles. But if it's been awhile since you've exercised and you have health issues or concerns, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor before starting a new exercise routine.

HONEY-TERIYAKI SALMON WITH CAULIFLOWER RICE



Ingredients

3 *tbsp* low-sodium soy sauce (or
tamari for gluten free)
6 *tbsp* mirin (Japanese sweet
rice wine)
2 *tbsp* honey
1 *lb* fresh wild salmon fillet, cut in 4
pieces
12 *ounce* asparagus, ends trimmed
cut 1-inch
4 *cups* raw or frozen riced
cauliflower
1 *tablespoon* olive oil
sesame seeds, optional for garnish

Directions

1. Combine the soy sauce, mirin, and honey in a resealable bag.
2. Add the salmon and mix to coat. Refrigerate for 15 to 60 minutes, or up to 8 hours.
3. Preheat oven 450F.
4. Remove salmon, reserving the marinade.
5. Toss asparagus with oil and season with salt. Transfer asparagus to a large sheet pan along with the salmon skin side down and cook until tender and cooked through, about 10 to 12 minutes.
6. Meanwhile, place the marinade in a small pot and simmer on low until thickened and reduced by half, about 8 to 10 minutes.
7. Spray a large skillet with oil. Cook the cauliflower rice in a skillet over medium-high heat until tender, 4 to 6 minutes.
8. To serve, divide the cauliflower rice, top with salmon and asparagus and drizzle with the glaze. Sprinkle with sesame seeds, if desired.

Nutrition Information

Yield: 4 servings
Serving Size: 1/4

Amount Per Serving:
Freestyle Points: 4
Points +: 8
Calories: 324
Total Fat: 13g
Saturated Fat: 2g
Cholesterol: 46.5mg
Sodium: 656mg
Carbohydrates: 27g
Fiber: 4g
Sugar: 17.5g
Protein: 24.5g

Recipe source:
<https://bit.ly/2lXCDP>