

Food Additives and Migraines

For people who experience painful migraines sometimes on a regular basis, the identification of the triggers that cause or contribute to their onset is particularly important. Any food can conceivably be a migraine trigger but some seem to be implicated more often than others.

Food additives are used to enhance flavors, prevent spoilage or change the colors of food products. There have been no definitive studies showing that they cause migraines, but many migraine sufferers report sensitivity to food additives and this link has been documented by various migraine associations. Although studies indicate general additive safety for use in food, some people may still find that they are sensitive to specific additives.

Monosodium Glutamate (MSG)

MSG is used as a flavor intensifier for other compounds in food. It is commonly found in soups, broths and restaurant food as well as being a component of yeast extract and hydrolyzed vegetable protein. It has been suggested that MSG may stimulate nerve cells to release certain neurochemicals that cause headache and migraine symptoms, which include pain and vasodilation in the head and neck.

Nitrites/Nitrates

Nitrates are not as widely used today, but nitrites continue to be added to cured and otherwise processed meats, such as hot dogs, bacon and luncheon meats. Nitrites serve to provide the aesthetic pink color in these products, add flavor and inhibit bacteria. In recent years, several studies have demonstrated that nitrites may intensify headaches in patients suffering from migraine.

Aspartame

Aspartame is a sweetener that has been approved for use and is generally considered safe. It is available on its own in powder or tablet form and is also used in many 'diet' food products. Despite its legal acceptance for use, many scientists have expressed caution for its use by those experiencing migraines.

Yellow Dye #5

Yellow dye #5, also known as tartrazine dye, gives foods a yellow color. Many colored foods contain tartrazine dye and some drugs are also colored with this additive. It is not directly known why tartrazine dye triggers headaches and migraines in some people but until more research is performed to establish or rule out a link, it is a food additive migraine sufferers should ingest with caution.

Sulfites

Sulfites are a class of chemicals that can keep cut fruits and vegetables looking fresh and are found in various alcoholic drinks, notably wines. Some people who suffer from migraines feel that their headaches are triggered by sulfite containing foods although no scientific studies have yet shown a direct link. Alcohol withdrawal is well documented to cause headaches and it may very well be withdrawal from the alcohol itself rather than sulfites that triggers a migraine headache.

Tyramine

Tyramine is an amino acid found naturally in aged cheeses, especially strong cheddars, and it is also found in red wine and other alcoholic drinks, and some processed meats. Studies on the tyramine-migraine link have thus far shown mixed results, which of course is of no relief for those suffering from migraines. Even with the lack of conclusive scientific evidence, anecdotal evidence still indicates a decrease in migraine headaches when dietary tyramine is reduced.

Some migraine patients show an elevated level of tyramine and this may be due to problems metabolizing the tyramine ingested from food.

Lots of Conflicting Information: What Can I Do?

Monitor what you eat and drink and if you get a headache, write down any food or drink you consumed prior to the onset of the headache. If you suspect a particular additive, try to obtain the same food item without the additive. For example, instead of meat deli slices on a sandwich, you might try bite-sized steak pieces in a wrap.

Generally, the more processed a food, the more likely it will contain food additives. Keep in mind that additives can be 'hidden' in various foods that you may not expect to contain the additive so be sure to read labels. If you see a pattern of migraines over time, you can either eliminate or reduce consumption of the food. Avoiding a suspected food trigger or group of food triggers entirely, however, is not always wise.

Complete elimination of certain foods can adversely affect other areas of your health. If you do eliminate a food, then be sure to substitute another healthy one and ensure that you eat regular meals, or you may find a migraine is triggered by low blood sugar.

<http://www.headacheexpert.co.uk/FoodAdditivesAndMigrainesWhatYouNeedToKnow.html>