

“Maybe It Was Something I Ate” The Headache-Nutrition Connection

By Susan E. Brown
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According to J.C. Breneman, M.D., author of *Basics of Food Allergy*, up to 60% of the adult population has hidden food intolerances or food allergies unknown to the person. An equal, if not larger percentage of all headaches may well also involve food allergies. In one recent study, for example, 85% of the migraine patients experienced a cessation of headaches upon elimination of foods to which they had hidden allergies.

If you suffer headaches with any frequency the odds are that your distress might indeed be related to something you eat. Here's how to find out for yourself!

Detecting Food Allergies

Four basic principles should be kept in mind when setting out to test for your own headache-food allergy connection:

1. To uncover the cause of your headaches, you must first uncover your headache occurrence pattern. When do the headaches occur? Under what circumstances, after eating which foods?
2. You are most often allergic to the foods you eat most often, that is to say your favorite foods, the ones you “crave.”
3. Food intolerances involve faulty immune responses and work in a cumulative fashion. One day your immune system might be in tip-top shape and you well tolerate the wheat toast, wheaties breakfast, and the spaghetti dinner. Another day, just the toast might trigger a headache.
4. Most food intolerance is found in association with faulty digestion and various vitamin/mineral deficiencies as well as an impaired immune system.

A Self-Help Food Allergy Detection Program

The following self-help steps logically flow from the above principles:

Step #1: Keep a diary of all the foods you eat for at least three weeks. List what you have for breakfast, lunch, dinner and all snacks in between. In another column, parallel to the food diary, note how you feel between meals. Did you have a headache? Felt congestion or fatigue? Jot down any unusual stress (arguments, worry, sadness, etc.) or other conditions you might associate with the headaches (for example, the weather, or missing a meal).

The three possible outcomes of Step #1 are (a) you may find a direct correlation between something you eat and the headaches. Everytime (or almost everytime)

you eat, say cheese, you get a headache. (b) You may find no direct, constant correlation but rather an occasional association. Sometimes you get a headache when eating cheese and other times you do not. (c) You may not be able to see a relation at all between headache and diet.

Many times Step #1 alone does not reveal food allergies because often one must detoxify the allergen by abstaining from it in order to notice an allergy. Nonetheless it is an important first step and even if you do not succeed in detecting the cause of your headaches, by just keeping these records you will learn a great deal of important information about your headaches and eating patterns.

Step #2: To identify your most likely allergens, make a list of your favorite foods. These are the foods you like the most, those you “would not like to live without.” Frequently one craves the food to which one is allergic.

Allergenic foods hook your body into an addiction. As you ingest, an allergic food the body secretes substances such as histamine, insulin, an adrenalin for protection. These substances cause a physiological rush, stimulating the body. As this seemingly pleasant biochemical effect wears off you undergo withdrawal symptoms and again crave the food to which you are allergic. Surely you yourself, or someone you know, have experienced withdrawal symptoms, such as headaches, fatigue, irritability after trying to omit coffee, sugar, chocolate, wheat or other allergenic/addictive foods from the diet.

Step #3: With this list of favorite foods in hand, now go about eliminating them from your diet one by one and see how your headache pattern responds. Begin, for example, with coffee or wheat and eliminate it during four weeks, all the time keeping your diet-headache record. You must be patient and totally detoxify your body from the food being tested before using that food again in your diet. After the four week test period, reintroduce that food into your diet by eating it alone, say have a meal of toast or spaghetti if you have been avoiding wheat. Watch carefully for symptoms: headaches, runny nose, fatigue. The pulse test developed by Dr. Coca is an additional way to see just how that food stresses your body (see reference below). If you get no immediate reaction, keep introducing the food and see how much of it you can consume before reaching tolerance (i.e. before getting a headache). Remember Principle #3, food sensitivities are cumulative – you might be able to tolerate one dose a day but not two. In addition they function in combination with other substances that stress the immune system, thus the total toxic and stress burden must be considered in your resistance or susceptibility to an allergen. Food allergies are aggravated by anything that challenges the immune system, such as stress, smoke, pollution, chemical poisons, or radiation.

The Most Common Problem Foods

Should you fail to recognize any cravings or favorite foods which you “can’t live without,” test yourself for the foods most commonly found to cause an allergic response. Research over the years has designated the most common offenders to be: wheat, milk, cheese, chocolate, sugar, peanuts, corn, eggs, citrus, pork, and any of the 3,000 preservatives and chemical additives allowed in the U.S. food supply.

Living with Food Allergies

Healthy people should be able to eat all foods, yet most North Americans cannot do so. Once you know the substance to which you are allergic, follow the next steps to overcome that allergic response.

- 1) Make a list of the problem foods. Be sure to include all food products that include that item. For example, virtually all bread contains wheat. Now avoid these foods as much as possible. An initial avoidance period of two to three months is ideal. After this period you can probably introduce the food on a rotation basis. Generally your body can “detoxify” itself from a food to which you are allergic by abstaining from that food for a number of weeks. Then allergenic food can usually be tolerated in small amounts every four days or so. The success of programs designed to provide systematic dietary variety has led to the popularization of many “rotation diets.” Several books listed below provide information on how to establish your own rotation diet.

Native peoples all over the world regularly consume hundreds of different plant and animal species, while some fifteen to twenty foods comprise the average North American diet. We tend to become allergic to that which we over consume.

- 2) Do everything within your power to correct any existing nutritional deficiencies. A professional diet analysis will provide accurate data on your intake of all the forty essential nutrients. Remember your body only requires *forty essential nutrients* for its manufacture of some *10,000 chemicals*. A deficiency in any one of the essential forty can lead to systemic breakdown; one symptom of which is susceptibility to allergies. As a rule, a person with allergies requires at a minimum additional amounts of vitamin C, the B complex vitamins (especially pantothenic acid) and the minerals zinc, chromium, and manganese.
- 3) Be vigilant in enhancing and rebuilding your immune system. Here key nutrients such as vitamin E, vitamins C and A, zinc, selenium, and the essential fatty acids all play important roles. Limit as much as possible your exposure to substances which damage the immune system. This includes all poisons, smoke, food additives, air pollutants, alcohol, mercury-containing dental fillings and the like.

- 4) Evaluate your digestion. Do you suffer from intestinal gas, burping, acid indigestion, heartburn, constipation or diarrhea or both? Some weakening of the digestive system is often associated with the allergic response.
- 5) Finally remember that stress aggravates food allergies and allergies can produce headaches. Take seriously the challenge to understand and mitigate the stressors in your life while also looking to see how you can build your body's resistance to stress. Poor nutrition leaves you less able to cope with stress and any increase in stress directly taxes your nutrient reserves.

Suggested Readings

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