

Headaches/Migraines and Nutrition



Having a migraine is difficult. Headaches and migraines can interrupt daily routines and decrease quality of life for many sufferers. Research shows that certain foods can be related to the onset of headaches/migraines. Additionally, there are substances that are added to foods that can trigger headaches/migraines. Here are some nutrition considerations to keep in mind.

Keep a food and headache diary. Track your food and beverage intake, portions, and the presence/absence of a headache. A detailed diary may help you identify certain foods, beverages, or patterns in your diet that may be triggers for headaches.

Eat at regular times. An inconsistent eating schedule can lead to dramatic fluctuations in your blood sugar. Skipping meals can result in headaches. To avoid rapid drops in blood sugar levels, try to eat on schedule. If you are not hungry at the time of the meal/snack, just eat less of your normal portion.

Keep well hydrated. Drink at least six cups (48 fluid ounces) of water each day. Drink more if you are exercising, experiencing illness (diarrhea, fever, etc.), or during periods of hot weather.

Get enough sleep and exercise. Ample sleep and regular exercise are vital to reducing headaches or migraines. Getting 7-8 hours of sleep a night and exercising regularly play major parts in a healthy lifestyle.

Eliminate one food or beverage at a time. Try eliminating a suspected item from your diet for 7 days. Research shows that some foods may trigger headaches 1 to 2 days after consumption. Have patience and track carefully any symptoms, along with your amounts and types of food/beverages.

Gradually eliminate caffeine. Caffeine withdrawal can result in severe headaches/migraines. Slowly reduce intake to no more than one to three 8 fluid ounce cups per day. If you find it to be a trigger, eliminate caffeinated beverages all together. Be aware that some decaffeinated beverages may also be triggers!

Prioritize having home-cooked meals with fresh ingredients. Eating less processed foods helps to minimize the preservatives and additives such as nitrites, nitrates, and MSG which can produce negative symptoms in individuals with sensitivities.

Consider low-fat and/or low-sodium diets. Although there are no standardized diets recommended for treating headaches/migraines, *low-fat* or *low-sodium* diets may reduce frequency and intensity of headaches/migraines. Consult with a dietitian or go to www.kphealthyme.com for further information.

Increase vitamins and minerals through diet. Certain vitamins and minerals have been shown to reduce frequency, duration, and intensity of headaches/migraines. Ask your doctor if you should be taking a vitamin/mineral supplement. Consider adding more of the following foods (so long as they are not triggers.)

Vitamin B-rich foods:

- **Vitamin B6:** Pork, poultry, fish, bread, whole grain cereals and breads, eggs, vegetables, beans
- **Folate (Vitamin B9):** Spinach, black-eyed peas, fortified cereals, asparagus, Brussel sprouts
- **Vitamin B12:** Seafood, beef, liver, trout, salmon, tuna, fortified cereals, milk
- **Riboflavin (Vitamin B2):** Fortified cereals, oats, yogurt, milk, beef, almonds, chicken, eggs

Magnesium-rich foods:

- Nuts and seeds: almonds, peanuts, cashews, pumpkin seeds
- Leafy greens (such as spinach, kale)
- Cereal (shredded wheat) and whole grains

Omega-3 fatty acid-rich foods

- Fish and other seafood (especially cold-water fatty fish, such as salmon, mackerel, tuna, herring, and sardines)
- Nuts and seeds (such as ground flaxseeds, chia seeds, and walnuts)

Foods to Evaluate

No single diet is "best" for every migraine patient. Keep in mind that there are individual differences. While certain foods may be offensive to some individuals, you may find that you can eat these same foods without having a headache or migraine. Likewise, there may be a combination of foods and certain environmental situations that can lead to symptoms.

To start, consider eliminating foods and beverages that contain sulfites, benzoates, and vaso-active amines (such as histamine, serotonin, and tyramine). These ingredients can act directly on small blood vessels which may be why they can trigger flushing, migraines, and nasal congestion in some people.

- Keep a detailed food journal to evaluate whether foods with sulfites, benzoates, and vaso-active amines should be partially (or completely) removed from your diet.
- Review the ingredient list of packaged foods for sulfite compounds, benzoic acid, sodium benzoate, and/or potassium benzoate.
- Consider allergy testing for further review of symptoms.
- Evaluate other triggers to migraines such as hormonal changes, stress, environmental (changes in barometric pressure), excessive sensory stimuli, and alcohol. These triggers can have a compound effect with food.
- Foods listed below can have a compound effect and precipitate a migraine. You may be able to tolerate these foods if you are not experiencing too many other triggers.

Potential Triggers	Recommended Foods
Common Sources of Sulfites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most all fresh, non-processed, non-packaged foods • Most fresh and frozen fruits • Most fresh and frozen vegetables • Most grains (whole grains are best) such as breads, rice, and pastas. Limit packaged mixes of grain. • Homemade soups made with fresh stock without MSG • Red meat, poultry, and fish - fresh or frozen (unprocessed, no breading) • Milk or milk alternatives (almond, soy, etc.) • Fresh and pasteurized cheese (i.e., American cheese, ricotta, cottage cheese) • Crackers, pretzels, chips, popcorn (low sodium or unsalted) • Condiments without MSG
Baked goods Soup mixes	
Dried fruits Canned vegetables	
Gravies and jams Beer and wine	
Bottled lemon juice and lime juice	
Common Sources of benzoates	
Fruit juice Vegetable or tomato juice	
Pickles Soft drink and colas	
Liquid flavor essences, syrups, and artificial flavoring	
Common Sources of vaso-active amines	
Dried fruits Overripe fruits, especially bananas and avocado Seafood (prawns, lobster, crab) Aged cheese (i.e. cheddar, swiss, parmesan, bleu cheese, brie, camembert, sour cream) Chocolate Fermented foods such as some vegetables (sauerkraut or kimchi) and dairy products (yogurt or kefir) and kombucha Canned or pre-packaged processed foods	

Sample Meal Plan

Breakfast	Spinach omelet, 1-slice of whole-grain toast and peanut butter, side of fruit
Lunch	Tuna salad sandwich with lettuce and whole-grain bread, side salad with leafy greens, egg, red onion, carrots, cucumber, and home-made vinaigrette
Snack	Low-fat cottage cheese and fresh fruit cup
Dinner	Marinated chicken breast with grilled vegetables and brown rice, sherbet with fruit
Snack	Carrots and hummus