

HEADACHE ELIMINATION DIET: A CLINICIAN'S GUIDE

What Is It?

There are a number of foods that seem to have an impact on headaches. For some people, it is clear that a particular food causes a problem whenever it is eaten. For others (the majority), different foods may contribute, but headaches occur after a person eats more than a certain amount of a particular chemical.

How Does It Work?

Headache elimination diets are based on avoiding foods that contain chemicals that can trigger headaches, such as tyramine, aspartame (NutraSweet), sulfites, and monosodium glutamate (MSG, sometimes listed only as 'flavor enhancer' on food ingredient lists). Decreasing intake of these compounds can reduce headache frequency for some people.

How Do I Use This?

The table below lists foods to avoid in descending order of importance. Determine the following with your patient:

- How long should the initial trial of the elimination diet be? Most experts recommend that it be followed for at least 3 months. Depending on how frequent headaches are, patients may be able to tell much sooner than that if it is working.
- Sometimes, the foods a person craves the most are most likely to be problematic.
- Over-ripe and processed foods can cause headaches. Fresh natural foods are a better bet.
- Everyone is unique. Some people may have issues with more than one food or chemical. Others may find they do better with eliminating other foods than those listed below, though the list is quite comprehensive.

When Should I Use It?

Give it a try for anyone with headaches, specifically with headaches with a migraine component (which can include auras, nausea/vomiting, sound and light intolerance, or simply is not clearly due to another cause, like tension in neck muscles or sinus inflammation). Some integrative health practitioners find it works particularly well in young people.

What Should I Watch Out For?

As with any elimination diet, it is important to ensure a person continues to eat a good balance of nutrients. Occasionally, a restrictive diet may trigger or unmask disordered eating behaviors.

Any Other Tips?

- Encourage patients with headaches to eat regular meals, whether they are eliminating a food or not. Low blood glucose triggers headaches for some people.
- A person on an elimination diet should plan carefully if they are traveling or going to be eating foods cooked by others.
- Take medications into account as well – for example, hormones, nitrates, drugs for erectile dysfunction, and asthma medications like albuterol can cause headaches as a side effect.

- Caffeine withdrawal can also be a contributor to headaches. While some people find benefit taking caffeine for headaches, others find it contributes to their symptoms.
- Elimination diets may benefit other conditions as well, such as type 2 diabetes, acid reflux, sinusitis, and joint pain.
- A trial involving 30 people with migraines found that tailoring diet to IgG testing (which is ordered by private labs and usually self-pay for patients) did reduce headache frequency.¹
- There is not a lot of research so far, but elimination diets may also be worth considering for abdominal and menstrual migraines.

Additional Resources

Bauman A. Headache: Educational Overview, Headache Module. Whole Health Library Website. Available at: <http://projects.hsl.wisc.edu/SERVICE/curriculum/index.html>. Accessed August 8, 2016.

Bauman A. Headache: Clinical Tool, Headache Module. Whole Health Library Website. Available at: <http://projects.hsl.wisc.edu/SERVICE/curriculum/index.html>. Accessed August 8, 2016.

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References

1. Alpay K, Ertas M, Orhan EK, Ustay DK, Lieners C, Baykan B. Diet restriction in migraine, based on IgG against foods: A clinical double-blind, randomised, cross-over trial. *Cephalalgia*. 2010;30(7):829-837.

*The table on the next page was informed by D. Rakel's Headache Elimination Diet handout, UW Integrative Medicine Department of Family Medicine and Community Health website, available at http://www.fammed.wisc.edu/files/webfm-uploads/documents/outreach/im/handout_ha_elim_diet_patient.pdf, and D. Buchholz's book, *Heal Your Headache: The 1-2-3 Program for Taking Charge of Your Pain*, published by Workman Publishing in 2002.*

Twelve Things to Stop Eating To Reduce Headaches*	
<p>1. Caffeine</p> <p><u>Avoid:</u> Coffee, tea (black, green, white, oolong), colas, energy drinks <u>OK to Eat:</u> Un-caffeinated herbal teas, other beverages not listed below</p>	<p>2. Chocolate</p> <p><u>Avoid:</u> Milk chocolate, dark chocolate, cocoa <u>OK to Eat:</u> White chocolate</p>
<p>3. Monosodium Glutamate (MSG)</p> <p><u>Avoid:</u> Chinese foods that aren't clearly MSG free; processed soups, bouillons, croutons, gravies, and salty snacks (e.g., airline food); seasoned salts, food from cheap buffets <u>OK to Eat:</u> Whole foods that you have flavored yourself, with natural herbs and spices</p>	<p>4. Processed Meats</p> <p><u>Avoid:</u> Any meat that has been aged, canned, fermented, tenderized, smoked, or preserved with nitrates or nitrites (like cold cuts/lunchmeats); liverwurst, jerky, bacon, pate', caviar, anchovies, smoked and pickled fish. Beef and chicken livers have tyramine <u>Instead, Use:</u> Fresh meats you cook yourself</p>
<p>5. Dairy Products</p> <p><u>Avoid:</u> Cheese - older and aged ones are worse, buttermilk, sour cream, yogurt <u>OK to Eat:</u> Cottage cheese, ricotta, good-quality American cheese, cream cheese</p>	<p>6. Nuts</p> <p><u>Avoid:</u> All nuts, including nut butters and peanuts (even though they aren't technically nuts) <u>OK to Eat:</u> Seeds instead</p>
<p>7. Some Fruits</p> <p><u>Avoid:</u> Citrus (oranges, tangerines, grapefruits, lemons, limes, pineapples). Bananas and dried fruits, raspberries, red plums, papayas, passion fruits, figs, dates, avocados, or anything overripe <u>OK to Eat:</u> Other fruits (apples, berries, apricots, melons, mangoes, peaches, pears, strawberries, grapes)</p>	<p>8. Some Vegetables</p> <p><u>Avoid:</u> Onions, sauerkraut, pea pods, beans (lentils, navy, fava, lima, and broad Italian), tomatoes (less common) <u>OK to Eat:</u> All other vegetables</p>
<p>9. Alcohol and Vinegar</p> <p><u>Avoid:</u> Red wine, champagne, dark drinks, ketchup, mustard, mayo <u>OK to Eat:</u> Clear distilled vinegar and vodka (though best to avoid all alcohol)</p>	<p>10. Baked Goods</p> <p><u>Avoid:</u> Anything fresh (less than one day old), especially sourdough, bagels, donuts, pizza crust, soft pretzels <u>Instead, Use:</u> Packaged breads</p>
<p>11. Sweeteners</p> <p><u>Avoid:</u> Anything with aspartame (NutraSweet) or saccharin (e.g. Sweet'N Low) <u>Instead, Use:</u> Other sweeteners (as tolerated)</p>	<p>12. Soy</p> <p><u>Avoid:</u> Processed soy like miso and tempeh; soy sauce <u>Instead, Use:</u> Packaged breads</p>

*Start with number one and go in order, as many as you want/need to try. Some people have trouble with more than one type of food.