

Headache Elimination Diet

For some lucky people, certain foods are known to trigger a headache every time they are eaten. Obviously, these foods should be avoided. But for the majority of people with headaches, certain chemicals in foods can create a “trigger load” that can reduce the threshold for developing a headache. Common chemicals in these foods include tyramine, sulfites, glutamine (MSG), aspartame and others. Reducing the amount of “load” of these chemicals in your system can significantly improve the frequency of headaches and sometimes result in complete resolution.

Some key things to remember....

- Stay on the Headache Elimination Diet for 3 months. After this period of time, you can slowly reintroduce foods one group at a time to see if the headaches return. Your headache threshold by this time may be much higher for a variety of reasons (better management of stress, exercise program, improved sleep, etc.), and you may be able to tolerate these foods without triggering headaches.
 - Sometimes the foods we crave the most (e.g., chocolate) are the most likely culprits.
 - Eat regular meals. Skipping meals can lead to fluctuations in blood sugar that trigger headaches.
 - This diet can be a challenge when you are traveling. Try to avoid restaurant food, and pack snacks with you when you can. Many of those salty snacks on airplanes contain MSG.
- There are other nice benefits to this diet as well. Many report weight loss, more energy and less acid reflux.
 - Everyone is unique and may have different food triggers. Listen to your body to see if there are other foods that are not listed that may be involved. Keeping a headache food diary can help with this process.
 - A good rule of thumb is to eat young, fresh natural foods. Avoid over-ripe and processed foods.
 - Don't forget to pay attention to drugs and supplements that can trigger headaches.

Common drugs: hormones, nitrates for heart disease (Isordil, Nitro-Dur), impotency medications (Viagra), Accutane (acne), asthma bronchodilators (Albuterol, Serevent) and many others.

Common supplements: diet aids (often contain caffeine and other stimulants) and many others.

- We recommend going off all supplements and botanicals except for the ones that are recommended by your health practitioner.



Headache Elimination Diet

Foods to Avoid (In descending order of importance)

Food	Avoid	OK
Caffeine	Coffee, tea, cola, chocolate	Caffeine free herb teas
Chocolate	All forms of milk and dark chocolate	White chocolate
Monosodium Glutamate (MSG)	Chinese and other restaurant foods; soups and bouillons; seasoned salt; flavored, salty snacks; croutons and bread crumbs; gravies; ready to eat meals; cheap buffets; processed meats; veggie burgers; processed and canned foods. Check labels and be wary of labels that say "natural flavoring."	A good general rule to avoid MSG is to include mostly natural whole foods in your diet. These foods do not contain this flavor enhancer. Use herbs and spices in your cooking for flavor.
Processed Meats and Fish	Aged, canned, cured, fermented, marinated, smoked, tenderized or preserved with nitrites or nitrates. Hot dogs, sausage, salami, pepperoni, bologna (and other lunch meats with nitrites), liverwurst, beef jerky, bacon, pates, smoked or pickled fish, caviar and anchovies. Avoid beef and chicken liver which are high in Tyromine.	Fresh meats and fish.
Cheese and Other Dairy Products	The older, more aged the cheese the worse. Beware of cheese containing foods including pizza (which also often contain processed meats). Avoid yogurt, sour cream and buttermilk.	Cottage cheese, ricotta, cream cheese and good quality American cheese.
Nuts	Avoid all kinds, as well as nut butters. Peanuts are not nuts (legumes) but should also be avoided.	Seeds are OK. The difference between a seed and a nut is that a nut is generally enclosed in a hard shell.
Alcohol and Vinegar	Especially red wine, champagne, and dark heavy drinks. Avoid condiments which are high in vinegar, such as ketchup, mustard and mayonnaise.	Clear distilled vinegar is best tolerated. Vodka is best-tolerated alcohol but would recommend avoiding all alcohol.
Certain Fruits and Juices	Mainly citrus fruits (oranges, grapefruits, lemons, limes, tangerines, clementines & pineapples) and their juices. Avoid bananas and dried fruits such as raisins (contain tyramine and sulfites). Avoid raspberries, red plums, papayas, passion fruit, figs, dates and avocados. Avoid over ripened fruits (high in tyramine).	All other fresh fruits. (apples, apricots, blackberries, blueberries, cantaloupe, cherries, cranberries, grapes, melon, mangoes, nectarines, peaches, pears, strawberries and watermelon).



Headache Elimination Diet

Foods to Avoid (In descending order of importance) con't

Food	Avoid	OK
Certain Vegetables, Particularly Onions	Onions, sauerkraut, pea pods and certain beans (broad Italian, lima, fava, navy and lentils).	All other vegetables and beans including leeks, scallions, shallots, spring onions and garlic.
Fresh Yeast-Risen Baked Goods	Less than one day old baked breads. Particularly sourdough, bagels, doughnuts, pizza dough, soft pretzels and coffee cake.	One exception to the "fresher is better" rule. Packaged commercial breads are less likely to trigger headaches.
Aspartame (NutraSweet)	Anything with aspartame, particularly diet sodas. Avoid Saccharin (Sweet'n Low)	Other sweeteners such as table sugar, sorbitol, xylitol, mannitol and sucralose (Splenda).
Others?	Everyone is unique. You may have a trigger that you are aware of that is not on the list. Consider also avoiding soy products. Particularly processed soy in the form of miso or tempeh. Avoid soy sauce (often contains MSG). Although less common, tomatoes can also be a trigger.	Soy oil, unflavored tofu, soymilk and flour.

*Adapted from Buchholz, D. Johns Hopkins. Heal Your Headache. Workman Publishing, New York. 2002. ISBN 0-7611-2566-3.

The information in this handout is for general education. It is not meant to be used by a patient alone. Please work with your health care practitioner to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health.

This handout was created by David Rakel, MD, Asst. Professor & Director of the Integrative Medicine Program, Dept. of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Date created: August 20, 2007

NOTES