

ELM Medicine

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**Specialist Clinic. Internal Medicine. Infectious Diseases. Hepatitis B & C. Chronic Pain.
Lifestyle Medicine Clinic. Stress Reduction Clinic**

Dr. Atreyi Mukherji, MD, MPH, FCRPC

CIM Migraine Diet: Pain-Safe Foods

Pain-safe foods virtually never contribute to headaches or other painful conditions. These include:

- Rice, especially brown rice
- Cooked green vegetables, such as broccoli, spinach, Swiss chard, or collards
- Cooked orange vegetables, such as carrots or sweet potatoes
- Cooked yellow vegetables, such as summer squash
- Cooked or dried non-citrus fruits: cherries, cranberries, pears, prunes (but not citrus fruits, apples, bananas, peaches, or tomatoes)
- Water: Plain water or carbonated forms, such as Perrier, are fine. Other beverages—even herbal teas—can be triggers.
- Condiments: Modest amounts of salt, maple syrup, and vanilla extract are usually well-tolerated.

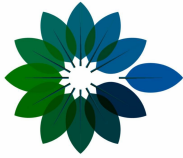
Common Migraine Triggers

Common triggers often cause headaches in susceptible people. Just as some food sensitivities manifest as a rash on your skin, migraine sufferers have a reaction in the blood vessels and nerves. Here are the common food triggers, also known as the "Dirty Dozen," in order of importance:

- dairy products*
- chocolate
- eggs
- citrus fruits
- meat**
- wheat (bread, pasta, etc.)
- nuts and peanuts
- tomatoes
- onions
- corn
- apples
- bananas

* Includes skim or whole cow's milk, goat's milk, cheese, yogurt, etc.

** Includes beef, pork, chicken, turkey, fish, etc.



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Certain beverages and additives are also among the worst triggers, including alcoholic beverages (especially red wine), caffeinated drinks (coffee, tea, and colas), monosodium glutamate, aspartame (NutraSweet), and nitrites.

Foods that are neither on the pain-safe list nor the common trigger list should be considered possible, but unlikely, triggers. Almost any common food, other than the pain-safe list, has triggered migraines in an isolated individual in a research study, so they cannot be considered completely above suspicion, but they are far from the most likely culprits.

The Two-Week Test

The first step in tackling your migraines is to check whether any of the common triggers are causing them. To do this, you simply avoid these foods. At the same time, include generous amounts of pain-safe foods in your routine and see whether migraines occur, and, if so, how often.

Here is how to start with anti-migraine foods. For two weeks:

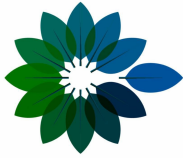
1. Have an abundance of foods from the pain-safe list.
2. Avoid the common triggers completely.
3. Foods that are not on either list can be eaten freely.

The key is to be very careful in avoiding the common triggers.

Confirm Your Food Triggers

If your diet change makes your headaches disappear or become much less frequent, the next step is to confirm which foods are your triggers. To do this, simply reintroduce the eliminated foods one at a time, every two days, to see whether any symptoms result. Start at the bottom of the list (bananas), and work your way up to the riskier foods, skipping any that you do not care for. If you wish, you can then check the beverages and additives on the common triggers list.

As you do this, have a generous amount of each new food, so you will know whether or not it causes symptoms. If it causes no problem, you can keep it in your diet. Anything that causes a headache should be eliminated again. Then, after a week or two, try the suspect food once again for confirmation. Keep your diet simple so you can detect the effect of each newly added food.



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Meats, dairy products, and eggs are best left off your plate permanently. Aside from being among the worst migraine triggers, they also tend to disturb your natural hormone balance, which contributes to migraines, as we will see shortly. Their cholesterol, fat, and animal proteins are linked to serious health concerns including heart disease, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, and cancers of the breast, prostate, and colon, so there is no need to welcome these problem foods back onto your plate.

Looking for Other Food Triggers

If two weeks on the basic anti-migraine diet does not reduce your headaches, the next step is to check whether a food that is not on the list of common migraine triggers may be causing your symptoms. This occasionally happens and, in fact, some people are sensitive to several different foods. An elimination diet will help you sort this out.

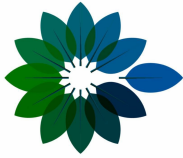
A Simple Elimination Diet

The elimination diet is designed to track down any unusual pain triggers. It is used for many other conditions, as well, particularly arthritis and digestive problems. Start by building your menu entirely from the pain-safe foods, avoiding all others for the moment.

Once your symptoms have gone or diminished, which may take a week or so, you can add other foods one at a time, every other day, to see which ones cause symptoms. Again, have a generous amount of each new food so you can see whether it causes symptoms. If not, you can keep it in your diet. Hold off adding any foods on the "Dirty Dozen" list and any of the beverage and additive triggers until last.

Here are some tips to help you identify triggers:

- Foods that have caused headaches were usually eaten within three to six hours of the attack.
- The offending foods can be ones you are very fond of, perhaps even foods for which you have cravings. They may be the ones you might least suspect.
- Sometimes the headache will not show up until a large amount of the culprit is eaten, perhaps over a few days.
- If you are affected by several foods, eliminating only one may make no difference at all. This sometimes leads people to believe that foods are not the problem.
- You might find that you can have a small amount of a trigger food without getting a headache, while a larger amount brings on the headache.
- Your tolerance might be different at different times. For example, a woman might normally be able to eat half a box of chocolates with no problem, but as she approaches her period a single



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piece might trigger the migraine. The reason, presumably, is that the natural changes in hormones that occur over the month affect her sensitivity.

•Your triggers can change over time.

If a Migraine Hits

If a migraine occurs, try the following:

•Although caffeine can be a migraine trigger for some people, for others it works as a treatment. The dose is one to two cups of strong coffee at the first sign of an attack.

•Have a starchy food, such as rice, potatoes, crackers, or bread. Yes, wheat products are migraine triggers for some people, but if you can tolerate them, they might actually help. Some people find that they actually crave starchy foods during migraines and that digging into toast, crackers, pasta, potatoes, or other starchy foods reduces the headache or nausea, and can even shorten the attack. Experience will tell you whether these foods help.

•Fresh powdered ginger, 500 to 600 milligrams (about 1/4 teaspoon), in a glass of water has been helpful in anecdotal reports. It can be repeated every few hours, up to about 2 grams per day.

•Calcium might be able to treat migraines as well as prevent them. Researchers reported a case of a woman who was able to stop an early migraine by chewing 1,200 to 1,600 milligrams of elemental calcium. Again, avoid the temptation to get calcium from milk, yogurt, or any other animal source. They cause much more trouble than they are worth.

•Lie down in a quiet, dark room, and sleep if you can. Use hot or cold compresses, and massage the blood vessels at the temples.

•Biofeedback and acupuncture have been helpful for many people as well.