

## MIGRAINE DEMYSTIFIED

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### Sinus Headache and Migraine



At this time of year, the cold and flu season takes hold, and many of us may think we have sinus headaches. But you might want to read this before you call your doctor for that antibiotic prescription.

While certainly it is possible for the migraine sufferer to develop a sinus infection, particularly if you also have seasonal allergies, many supposed sinus headaches are, in fact, migraines.

The sinus cavities are lined by sensitive tissues whose nerves are fed mostly by a branch of the trigeminal nerve. This is the same nerve responsible for migraine headaches. When you have sinus congestion, it can cause what is called referred pain, sending pain to distant areas in the face and head away from the sinuses themselves.

So, sinus headaches may cause pain that is not in the sinus region, and migraines can cause pain that is in the sinus region. Just to make things even more confusing, some migraine sufferers experience nasal congestion or watery eyes with their migraine attacks. This is because the trigeminal nerves can release neurotransmitter chemicals that cause blood vessels to dilate, which is why your eyes get red and watery and your nose gets congested.

A recent study called the Sinus, Allergy and Migraine Study studied 100 subjects self-diagnosed with sinus headaches. They were then evaluated by headache specialists, and 63% were diagnosed with either migraine with aura or migraine without aura, and 23% with probable migraine. Only 3% actually had sinusitis. Interestingly, 62% reported that exposure to allergens was a significant headache trigger.

Although the symptoms can overlap, these general guidelines can help somewhat in telling migraine and acute sinus infection apart. Chronic sinus headache is more difficult.

#### SINUS INFECTION

- Usually bilateral
- Fever\*
- Discharge thick, yellowish-green\*
- Diminished or absent sense of smell\*
- Minor factors: halitosis (bad breath), cough, headache, dental pain, ear pressure, fatigue
- Facial pain or pressure—more likely to be non- throbbing
- Sinus CT or direct examination positive

#### MIGRAINE

- Often (not always!) one-sided\*
- No fever
- Discharge thin, clear if present
- Heightened or altered sense of smell or avoidance or odors
- Occasional symptom: watery, red eyes

### Reduce Triggers



It is commonly known that foods can trigger migraine headaches. But did you know that there are many non-food triggers? A recent poll conducted by the World Headache Alliance asked "What is the most significant factor preventing you from effectively managing your headaches?" Most people indicated that it was the inability to manage stress and other lifestyle factors.

#### LIFESTYLE TRIGGERS

There are many things that count as lifestyle triggers, but if you follow a generally healthy lifestyle, it covers most of them.

Get enough sleep. Although many people try to skimp on sleep, most adults need 7 to 8 hours of sleep a night.

Follow a regular bedtime. Did you know that sleeping in more than an hour past your normal awakening time can trigger a migraine for some people?

Drink enough water—dehydration causes headaches.

Eat regular meals—skipping meals can trigger a migraine.

Exercise regularly.

Use caffeine moderately.

Use alcohol moderately.

Take breaks.

Take vacations.

#### STRESS

We all have stress in our lives. It is not possible to do away with it. However, we can learn to manage stress. Here are some ways to cope:

Learn better time-management skills.

Become more organized.

Learn to delegate.

Practice yoga.

Regular massages.

Relaxation therapy.

Biofeedback.

Meditation.

There is also a difference between regular everyday stress and the kind that is unusual and unhealthy. Sometimes this comes from problems you are having in your life, sometimes it comes from things in your past that is affecting your health now, and sometimes it just comes from coping with chronic headache

- Facial pain or pressure—more likely to be throbbing or pulsating\*
- Diagnosis based on symptoms.

\*Major features of each disorder.

The prevalence of sinusitis is 15% of the population— even higher than migraine, unless we take into consideration the possibility of overdiagnosis of acute sinusitis in the migraine population.

As if this were not confusing enough, there is another headache type called Contact Point headache. This occurs when you have a deviated nasal septum or bone spurs in the nose, and the bone from the center of your nose comes in contact with the sensitive tissue on the other side of your nose. This can cause headaches that can feel very much like a migraine.

If you think you have allergic rhinitis triggering migraines, it may be worthwhile to see an allergist. Specific treatment of allergies may reduce the occurrence of your migraines. If you think you have a sinus problem, it may be worthwhile to see an ear, nose, and throat physician (the fancy name is otorhinolaryngologist—whew!). Treatment of a mechanical problem like a deviated septum, bone spurs, or other physical sinus problems can be helpful if you truly do have chronic sinusitis. Gastric reflux can also be a cause of chronic sinusitis.

Be careful about treating yourself with over-the-counter sinus medications, especially if you do so on a frequent basis. This can result in rebound rhinitis, causing more nasal congestion than you might otherwise have had. They can also cause rebound headaches if used frequently. It is always best to see your doctor for examination, particularly since this can be such a confusing diagnostic challenge. One thing is for sure, though—antibiotics are not the best treatment for migraine! So don't just pick up the phone and ask for a prescription. If there is any doubt, go in and be seen.

pain. There are specialized techniques for dealing with this kind of psychological stress in addition to the above:

Cognitive therapy

Hypnotherapy

When appropriate, marital counseling or family counseling

Psychotherapy

So don't let the holiday season make you crazy, and don't run the risk of ruining your holidays with a headache. Remember to take a little time for yourself, and manage your headache triggers the best you can during this busy season.

## Have A Wonderful New Year !

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