

Can Migraines Be Helped?

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Migraine headache is a very common often disabling neurological condition that plagues 18 percent of women and 6 percent of men at some point during their life. It is one of the most common causes of lost work time. Headaches are usually severe, throbbing, nauseating and associated with light sensitivity, visual symptoms and occasional neurological symptoms that can at times mimic stroke. The cause of migraine is not fully understood, but relates to electrochemical transmission abnormalities in the brainstem leading to a sterile painful inflammation of facial blood vessels coupled with a sensitized pain processing center in the central nervous system.

Years ago, migraine headaches were just dealt with by wrapping one's head with a tight towel wrap and by going to a dark room. Thankfully, we now are better able to manage this disabling ailment.

One manages migraines by preventing its occurrence (prophylactic therapy) and by taking it away when it occurs (abortive therapy). Prevention is always the best approach in the long run, especially when the frequency and severity of headaches become life altering.

The first rule of migraine management is to thoroughly evaluate for potential triggers. Common triggers include certain foods like caffeine, chocolate, MSG, cheeses; female hormone fluctuations, stress, lack of exercise, medications, allergies, temporomandibular joint disease, neck pain and poor sleep. Most everyone can get some sort of improvement in their headache frequency and possibly intensity by addressing potential triggers. The next level of prevention is to consider nutritional supplementation protocols. Vitamin B2 (riboflavin), magnesium, and coenzyme Q10 have been shown in the medical literature to reduce the frequency of migraines if taken for at least 90 days. Herbal therapies such as butterbur and feverfew can reduce the frequency of migraines also.

Mind-body medicine therapies to reduce pain and stress, exercise and sleep hygiene management can all be quite effective for migraine prevention and need to be incorporated into the action plan whenever possible. Chiropractic, massage therapy and acupuncture can be helpful in properly selected individuals.

When the above treatment options have been exhausted, then daily medication therapy is warranted. Certain antidepressants, B-blockers, calcium channel blockers and anti-seizure medications have been shown to reduce the frequency and intensity of headaches if given the time and dose escalation to do so. Some refractory headaches will respond to intradermal injections of Botulinum Toxin around the scalp and head. This treatment reduces muscle spasms as well as reduces pain transmission signals bombarding the brainstem. This treatment has a low side effect profile and is safe to take on an ongoing basis which usually ends up to be about every 3 months.

Of course, one needs to know how to break a headache when it develops. Simple anti-inflammatory or caffeine based medications should be the first line of therapy as long as they are not abused. If these fail, then there are many prescription medications available like the “triptan class” of medications which can be quite helpful if taken right at the beginning of the headache.

Make no mistake, managing migraine headaches can take time and a lot of hard work. But thankfully, our options for management are many. Thus, with perseverance, patience and the help of a holistically oriented medical provider, successful management of migraine headaches is very realistic if not probable.