

# Understanding & Treating Migraines

## *Improving outcomes by using naturopathic approaches along with traditional treatments*

by Sophie Lorn, ND



**A**sk anyone with a history of migraines and they will tell you definitively and adamantly they are not fun, they disrupt quality of life, and it's hard to predict exactly when they will hit. Migraines tend to be recurring, throbbing headaches that are often associated with nausea, vomiting, light sensitivity, temporary visual disturbances, and weakness. More than 37 million Americans suffer from migraines, with women affected about three times more than men.

The cause of migraines is not completely understood, although it's thought to be due in part to blood vessel constriction followed by a reactive dilation. Classic migraines typically follow a four-phase pattern: prodrome, aura, headache, and postdrome. The prodrome phase can start up to 24 hours prior to the actual headache itself. There may be unexplained mood changes, fatigue, fluid retention, and increased urination. In the aura phase, bright lights, zigzag lines, or halos of light frame the field of vision. The headache itself can start gradually and strengthen to the point of intense throbbing and pulsing pain, typically on just one side of the head. Some people report migraines without the headache pain itself, instead experiencing only symptoms that include sensitivity to light, sound, smells, and even GI pain. Nausea and vomiting are prominent, and these symptoms overall can be exacerbated by even the slightest movement. The postdrome phase is said to be similar to a bad hangover, where people feel weak, confused, and simply exhausted after the pain subsides.

The causes of recurring migraines are vast and some-

times inconsistent. For many people, it takes diligence, patience, and time to track patterns of triggers. Some researchers believe that there may be a genetic component,

and most migraine sufferers tend to have family members with a history of migraines. Hormonal changes can also initiate migraines, which may be why women tend to experience them more than men, especially during certain times in their menstrual cycles. Lifestyle factors such as increased stress, poor posture, caffeine consumption, skipped meals, sleep deprivation, and food sensitivities also play a role in setting off migraines. Reports of other potential triggers resemble the symptoms themselves: bright flashing lights, strong odors, and overexer-



tion. This can lead to a continuous and debilitating cycle of chronic pain that eventually can generate depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues.

*“The causes of recurring migraines are vast and sometimes inconsistent.*

*For many people, it takes diligence, patience, and time to track patterns of triggers.”*

Due to the vast number of factors and the variation of symptoms from person to person, interventions should be properly individualized, and patients should work closely with their practitioners to develop a plan for prevention as well as amelioration of the pain. The most common allopathic treatments to treat migraine episodes include over-the-counter nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs and pain relievers such as Excedrin, Aleve, Advil, Motrin, etc.

If these do not work, other prescription medications such as Imitrex, Amerge, and Zomig are introduced. These are known as triptans and work like the brain chemical serotonin by helping to quiet down overactive pain nerves and reverse the changes in the brain that caused the migraine in the first place. They can bring relief within a couple

hours of administration, but long-term use does come with side effects that include dizziness, tightness in the throat, muscle weakness, nausea, and fatigue. To prevent migraine recurrence, medications such as valproic acid and beta-blockers are often used. While these treatments may be effective temporarily, they can cause adverse effects, such as rebound headaches, heart issues, and potential drug dependence.

There are many migraine sufferers who do not get relief primarily through medications. As a former migraine sufferer myself, I empathize greatly not only with the pain of migraines themselves, but also with the frustration of unsuccessful treatments. For about 15 years, I lived my life around migraine management and was constantly meeting with neurologists to rule out brain tumors and disorders that ran in my family, only to be met with more medications. I remember being bedridden in a dark room for days at a time and couldn't go more than two weeks before being dragged back into the cycle of pain and medication. Over time, my pain tolerance increased, and my friends and family got used to my being the one who had to back out of plans because of yet another migraine. Eventually, I got angry and fed up, and I simply refused to accept that this was going to be the pattern for the rest of my life. This was one of the primary reasons I decided to seek out other means of treatment.

## Identifying Migraine Triggers

I met with Dr. Jeanne Galloway, one of the only naturopathic doctors in my area, who educated me on how to track my migraine triggers. As a pretty unhealthy 17-year-old college student at the time, my triggers were macaroni and cheese, cheap red wine, and staying up too late to pull



*Migraine sufferers should work closely with their practitioners to develop prevention and treatment plans.*

*“I pride myself on being a non-quick-fix practitioner and explain to my patients that these conditions, even as painful and life-interrupting as migraines are, may be messages from the body, which is screaming that foundational changes to overall lifestyle behaviors are needed.”*

sleep, developing a meditation practice, paying attention to proper hydration, and getting regular exercise.

I developed a new intimate awareness of myself and shifted the relationship with my entire mind and body. I discovered that I was not doomed to migraines as I had once believed; instead, I learned to listen to my body so I could properly take care of it. In return, my body took care of me. This newfound revelation that I wasn't a victim helped me cultivate a deeper respect for my overall wellness that eventually led me towards a path in the naturopathic medical profession. It's been about 20 years since I met with Dr. Galloway, and now I get a migraine only once every two years instead of three every single week. Needless to say, my quality of life has dramatically improved, with great thanks to her.

## Customizing a Treatment Plan

When working with migraine patients in my own medical practice, I always begin by taking an inventory of their overall medical history that includes their nutrition, sleep, and stress histories and a comprehensive review of all body systems. My treatment plans are extensive but practical. I pride myself on being a non-quick-fix practitioner and explain to my patients that these conditions, even as painful and life-interrupting as migraines are, may be messages from the body, which is screaming that founda-

all-nighters. She guided me in completing an elimination diet during which I consumed an exclusively whole-food, plant-based diet while slowly adding in new foods to determine if they stimulated a reaction. Over time, not only was I able to identify triggers and avoid them, but the process formed the foundation for many more healthy self-care practices, such as getting adequate

tional changes to overall lifestyle behaviors are needed.

When it comes to lifestyle and habit modification, awareness and identification is usually the first step. I always ask my patients, “What are the most consistent

things you do on a daily basis? Let’s take an inventory and begin building more health-promoting habits.” Of course, the first thing they identify is that they eat every day, which is usually where I like to start. Dietary modification plays a significant role in migraine maintenance. Studies show abnormal blood sugar regulation to be a strong cause of migraines and a common trigger for recurrence. Eating regularly every few hours and maintaining healthy blood glucose levels are just as important as eating the right foods. I usually have my patients complete an elimination diet that

includes a lot of vegetables, healthy proteins, complex carbohydrates, water, and fiber, with elimination of dairy, gluten, refined products, and all added sugar. I advise diligently tracking food intake in a food diary to bring awareness to the relationship between foods and how their body responds to them.

## Allergies affect Migraines

The recognition that food allergies play a role in chronic conditions has become more prevalent in modern-day medicine, and migraines are no exception. The importance of food allergies has been documented in medical literature for almost a century, but many doctors remain unaware of this information or find it challenging to properly advise their patients on the relationship between food and migraines. Non-allergy-related food reactions can play a role as well. These types of food reactions are different from food allergies and sensitivities in that the mechanism is less mediated by the immune system; rather, they’re caused by reactions to vasoactive substances in foods. Vasoactive compounds include triggers like tyramine, phenylethylamine, aspartame, monosodium glutamate, and histamine that are found in foods like cheese, chocolate, citrus

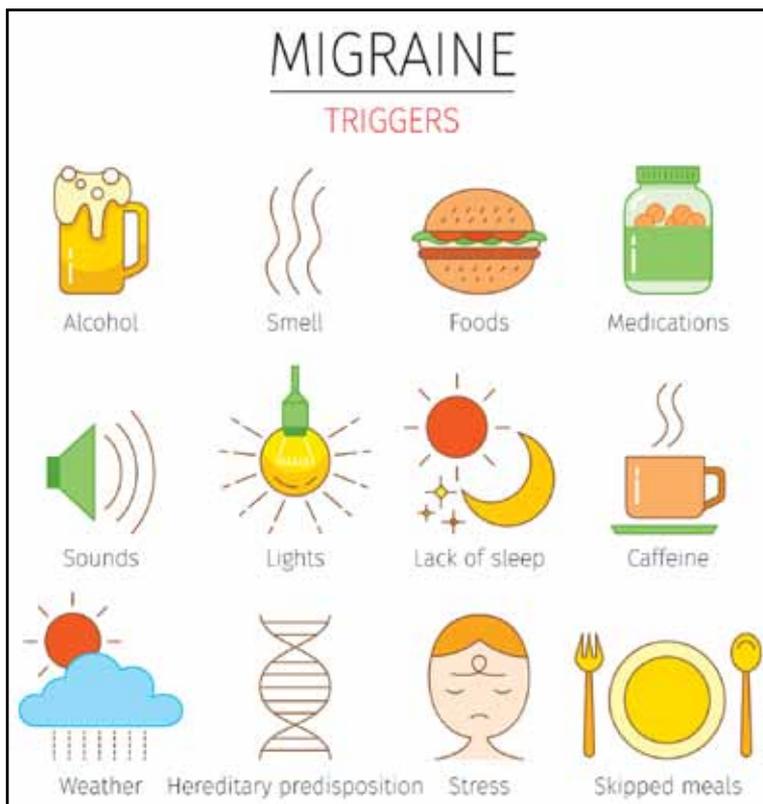
fruits, alcohol, processed foods, and diet beverages.

In some cases, nutritional supplements can be of benefit. Magnesium, riboflavin, and coenzyme Q10 have been studied and have shown efficacy in promoting relief for

some migraine patients. But before rushing out to your local health food store, look to improve your diet with whole foods rich in these and all micronutrients. A qualified, plant-based nutritionist can offer valuable guidance to maximize the migraine-fighting potential of your diet.

While I understand that for some of my patients, medications will always be necessary for management, I emphasize that lifestyle changes will always be, too, and that they should take priority. The key is to develop the necessary health foundations and preventive measures in

order to minimize the number of overall interventions as much as possible, whether they be pharmaceutical or supplemental. I remind my patients that finding long-term migraine relief may take time and patience, but from personal experience, it is all well worth the effort in the long run. 



**Dr. Sophie Lorn** has a passion for helping others achieve their best lives possible, which starts with great health. She is devoted to helping patients piece together symptoms and patterns of imbalance to guide them towards their own paths of optimal wellness. She believes that everyone deserves the chance to be educated about their bodies in order to achieve the level of health they desire and a lifestyle that allows them to do what they love with more freedom, joy, and ease.

Dr. Lorn studied biology and human development at the University of Texas at Austin, received her doctorate from Bastyr University in Seattle, and completed her residency at TrueNorth Health Center in Santa Rosa, CA. Dr. Lorn practices general medicine in Brentwood, CA, and is the onsite naturopathic doctor at Trilogy at the Vineyards. She is a member of the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians, California Naturopathic Doctors Association, and the International Association of Hygienic Physicians.