

## **HEADING FOR TROUBLE?**

It's not just alcohol that can go straight to your head; certain foods can too – while others may help ward off pain. The key is learning which is which.

The link between headaches and specific “trigger” food and drink – in particular caffeine, cheese, chocolate and red wine – has long been recognised by sufferers and scientists alike. But research now indicates that certain food stuffs can actually help prevent and ease symptoms too.

Some believe this is due to a connection between your brain and your gut, known as the gut-brain link. Leading the way in this field is Michael Anderson, an MD and professor at the University of New York, and the so-called “father” of neurogastroenterology. In his book “The second brain” (Harper Collins) he explains that the gut is the only organ in the body that contains its own nervous system to control function in the complete absence of any input from the brain or spine. His studies have discovered that the “gut brain” and cranial brain evolve from the same embryonic cells and are intricately related. So it makes sense that what goes into one, may affect the other.

### **The vital link**

Both the brain and the gut rely on serotonin. In fact, as percent of this neurotransmitter – low levels of which are thought to be linked to depression – is made in the gut. And studies have shown that following the onset of a bad headache, levels of serotonin will fall dramatically.

If you regularly suffer from severe headaches and your GP has ruled out other causes, it's worth taking a look at your diet. But which foods will help ward them off? And which should you be wary of?

### **Ones to watch**

Products rich in nitrates can cause blood vessels to dilate and expand, which can lead to pain. Meanwhile, foods high in tyramine, and amino acid, can adversely affect the blood vessels in your brain mimicking a migraine and triggering headaches.

Fasting and skipping meals is another known contributory factor to eat regularly throughout the day including breakfast.

Common headache triggers:

Cheese, alcohol (especially tannin rich red wine), caffeine, MSG, chocolate, aged and processed meats, soy beans, green beans and broad beans, peanuts, and aspartame (an artificial sweetener).

## **Feed your head**

Foods thought to ease headaches, and even migraines, do so by supplying nutrients that are essential for healthy gut and brain function. Magnesium, for example, helps to stabilize blood vessel walls, and some researchers recommend eating foods rich in easily digested protein, as the inability to properly digest protein has been identified as a possible cause of headaches.

Other foods are thought to help circulation, while calcium is known to relax the muscles in the neck and shoulders, countering a common cause of tension headaches.

Finally, products that contain tryptophan, an amino acid that our bodies can convert to serotonin, are also recommended.

## **Foods that fight headaches**

- Peppermint and ginger, which can ease the nausea that often accompanies migraines.
- Cayenne pepper, which some believe can block pain paths in the body.
- Fish and fish oils which contain easy to digest proteins.
- Spinach, which is rich in magnesium.
- Kale and broccoli, both rich in calcium, and
- All foods containing high levels of tryptophan, such as turkey and duck, walnuts and almonds, sesame seeds and pumpkin seeds, whole grains and rice, and oatmeal.

If you suspect that foods might be responsible for your headaches, then it's a good idea to experiment with a restrictive diet for a month, cutting out all of the "common triggers" identified above. If there is no change to your health, then it's likely that your diet is not responsible for your headache. If, however, you do notice an improvement in the frequency and severity of your headaches, the next step is to reintroduce each type of food or drink into your diet, one by one, to determine which the culprits are. Then you can simply eliminate them altogether.