

Relief from Migraine – the gut/brain connection

When considering herbal medicine, it is always helpful to look at the effect of intestinal health on migraine occurrence. There is an abiding connection between intestinal health and the entire body's ability to function normally.

The enteric nervous system is the nerve network of the digestive tract. It is so complex that it is sometimes termed 'the second brain'. The vagus nerve efficiently conveys information from this 'intelligent' visceral circuitry to the brainstem. Anything occurring anywhere in the digestive tract is almost instantly perceived in the brain. The numerous blood vessels attached to the intestines are also instrumental in speedily delivering substances around the body and to the brain.

It is often easy to think we have a healthy diet when, in fact, the things we eat can be destroying our wellbeing by degrees. By clogging the intestines we cause alterations in gut structure, dysfunction of the gut wall, destruction of intestinal bacteria and changes in brain chemistry. This interferes with the complex physiological processes involved in digestion, absorption and elimination, sabotaging our body's ability to maintain normal health. Migraine can be a manifestation of a subtle or gross imbalance in this area, complicated by other outside factors.

So, as usual ... diet is key. Intestinal clearance and detoxification is often necessary, followed by reinstating intestinal bacteria and eating unrefined, fresh foods free of synthetic chemicals. Give your body this and it has the innate 'wisdom' to heal itself from even some seemingly incurable conditions.

Probiotics – Of the hundreds of thousands of strains of bacteria naturally residing in our intestines, there are multiple positive effects from our symbiotic relationship with them. Some of these beneficial bacteria repress disease-causing micro-organisms, others aid in the digestion of carbohydrates, some manufacture substances such as vitamins, produce chemicals vital for our immune system, support DNA and even promote the growth of blood vessels crucial for healthy gut function and the absorption of nutrients.

The state of intestinal bacteria has significance for migraine sufferers. As well as digestive enzymes, we have intestinal bacteria that aid in the breakdown of protein. When proteins are digested correctly, they are broken down to peptides and amino acids that are then used by the body to create neurotransmitters and hormones. However, if proteins are ineffectively broken down due to a disruption of bacteria or digestive enzymes, we get either too little or too much at the wrong time. Low levels of the neurotransmitter, serotonin, have been shown to be a co-factor in triggering a migraine. Amongst other functions, serotonin affects blood vessel contraction.

Poor food choices cause a buildup of undigested, putrefactive matter, an underlying cause of dysfunction of the processes of digestion and elimination. This poor intestinal health leads to faulty manufacture of brain chemicals such as serotonin.

Without a healthy intestinal environment, helpful bacteria cannot thrive. Without the bacteria our chemical balance is upset, contributing to various health imbalances including migraine. To be migraine-free, we must first look to the status of the gut, then to regulation of body chemistry in the blood and ultimately the brain where the pain of migraine manifests.

Diet – While certain foods are believed to trigger migraine, there are usually contributing factors. Dehydration, blood sugar imbalance, hormonal variation, emotional upset and inadequate sleep have a physiological effect that can generate a deluge of events leading to migraine. Even the very drugs you might take to relieve migraine can end up perpetuating a cycle of rebound headaches.

some simple guidelines

- Eat low glycaemic index foods and regular meals to keep your blood sugar balanced.
- Choose unrefined foods, as close to nature as possible; plenty of vegetables and fruit with some lean protein. Remember that vegetables supply protein too.
- Drink water!
- Avoid MSG, nitrates in preserved meats and alcohol. Amines (found in chocolate, hard cheeses, beer and wine) are thought to be amongst the major food triggers.
- Avoid habitual caffeine.
- Ensure adequate intake of dietary minerals. Use mineral supplements where the diet is lacking – as in foods grown in mineral-deficient soils, now widespread across the globe.
- The body has a high requirement for magnesium (found in green leafy veges), which aids in the relaxation of blood vessels and may be helpful in controlling migraine. Try soaking in a bath with one to two cups of Epsom salts dissolved in it, if you have a migraine.
- Vitamin B2 and co-enzyme Q10 are required by cells for efficient energy use, and can reduce migraine frequency.
- Vitamin B6 aids the reduction of inflammation by supporting the enzymatic breakdown of histamine.

Herbs for migraine – With a healthy digestive tract and a well-nourished body, herbs have a fairer chance of taking effect. Think of herbs as being both a food source and a medicine. They provide useful substances, inhibit harmful ones, support body functions and are antioxidant. Many herbs can be drunk as a tea and can be combined in a formula.

- **Feverfew** (*Tanacetum parthenium*)

Grow feverfew in the garden and chew on a few leaves when you experience a migraine aura. It is thought to work by inhibiting the generation and release of pro-inflammatory prostaglandins. It has also been shown to inhibit serotonin release from platelets, aiding blood vessel tone and constriction. This is a very bitter herb that promotes digestive secretions for improved food assimilation. It can also be taken prophylactically – consume two to three leaves daily to reduce the frequency of migraines.

- **St John's wort** (*Hypericum perforatum*)

Helps to keep serotonin available in neuron synapses (spaces between nerve endings) of the brain. Take with professional guidance if using migraine drugs. Protects the liver, nourishes, repairs and calms the entire nervous system and relieves pain.

- **Kava** (*Piper methysticum*)

Relaxes and reduces anxiety. Good for stress management and pain.

- **California poppy**
(*Eschscholzia californica*)

Relieves pain and relaxes spasm.

- **Jamaican dogwood** (*Piscidia piscipula*)

Strong pain relief.

- **Turmeric** (*Curcuma longa*)

Strong anti-inflammatory, digestive and liver support, blood thinning.

- **Milk Thistle** (*Silybum marianum*)

Regenerates liver cells, improves liver detoxification, supports digestion, relaxes spasms.

- **Ginkgo** (*Ginkgo biloba*)

Inhibits platelet aggregation (anti-PAF) to reduce blood viscosity, improves circulation.

- **Valerian** (*Valeriana officinalis*)

Calms, soothes, relaxes, relieves pain.

- **Ginger** (*Zingiber officinale*)

Another plant that improves blood circulation; inhibits thromboxane and other prostaglandins. Relieves inflammation, nausea and vomiting.

- **Peppermint** (*Mentha piperita*)

Drink as a tea and apply essential oil to base of skull and temples. Use at beginning of headache for best effect. Relieves nausea and vomiting.

- **Chamomile** (*Matricaria recutita*)

Drink tea regularly – aids digestion, nourishes and relaxes the nervous system.

- **Barley grass** (*Hordeum vulgare*)

Contains Super Oxide Dismutase (SOD), an important antioxidant; supports the liver, high in B vitamins. Take as part of the regular diet.

Some of these herbs should not be used during pregnancy, always consult a qualified medical herbalist.

By supporting your internal and external environment with a holistic approach to diet, stress management and pain relief, herbal medicine can help you safely move towards relief from migraine. 🌿

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