



# Health & Wellness



## Headache Sufferers:

*Do Weather Changes Worsen Your Headache? Do You Get a Headache Quickly After You Eat? Is It Sinus Headache, Allergic Headache or MIGRAINE?*

By Dr. Nesreen Suwan

"I first got my headaches when I was 15. I was diagnosed with recurrent sinus headaches because of the pain and pressure sensation around my sinuses that was exacerbated by weather changes. Over the years I was treated with many allergy medications and antibiotics with partial or no improvement" said Mrs. S, a 35-year-old energetic computer engineer and mom of 3 kids. She had had two sinus surgeries without significant improvement.

She described her headaches as throbbing, disabling, and debilitating. She reported significant menstrual association, but the headaches came outside the menstrual cycle as well. They were frequently associated with specific food types that include blue, aged cheese and chocolate. She thought that those headaches resulted from food allergies. She described declining neurological function during her headaches along with mood changes, lack of concentration, fatigue, and sensitivity to light, sound, and occasionally smell. Her headaches were associated with nasal congestion, pain and pressure sensation in the sinus area.

After consulting with a specialist, Mrs. S discovered that her headaches, previously diagnosed as sinus and food-related, were in fact MIGRAINES!

### Allergies and Headaches

Certain foods (such as caffeine, chocolate, aged cheeses, alcohol, peanuts, and MSG) can trigger migraine headaches in some people, but this is not necessarily an allergy. Although many people think that a "bad reaction" to a food is the same as an allergy, it is not.

If you get a headache fairly quickly after you eat something, and the headache is accompanied by hives, swollen lips, difficulty breathing, vomiting, or rapid heartbeat, this is considered a medical emergency and you should seek immediate treatment. Food allergies can become very serious very quickly.

Food-induced headaches without the above symptoms may mean that the person is not allergic to the offending food, specific foods can trigger migraines.

### Headaches and Sinuses

Many people who suffer from headaches mistakenly believe that their pain is due to "sinus headaches" or to allergies. Although these conditions can occasionally cause headache, they are not the underlying cause in the vast majority of headache sufferers. Most people who think they have sinus headache actually have migraines. Self-diagnosed sufferers who seek over-the-counter, mail order or alternative cures for allergies and sinuses are not likely to achieve satisfactory pain control. In general, allergies do not cause headaches. However, acute infection of the sinuses, otherwise known as acute sinusitis, is one example of a true sinus headache. Acute sinusitis, which are isolated episodes of infection, often produces dramatic, painful symptoms. In addition to pain, it is often accompanied by fever, a redness of the skin over the sinus, and yellow-green discharge from the nostrils and the back of the throat

Chronic (or on-going) sinusitis may not be associated with disabling headaches. Many people suffering from migraine feel that their headaches are caused by sinus problems because the pain occurs in the same location of the head and face as a sinus infection. In addition, headaches such as migraines and cluster headaches are commonly triggered by changes in weather and can be accompanied by symptoms such as a runny nose and watery eyes. These overlapping symptoms can cause confusion in diagnosis and lead to the mistaken belief that a person's headaches are due to a sinus condition.

### Diagnosis and Treatment

Mrs. S is not alone. One migraine study revealed that over 50% of the 28 million migraine sufferers are misdiagnosed. Misdiagnosis results in ineffectual treatment, resulting in poor headache control, which interferes with regular daily activities and impacts the quality of life. Migraine is a common, neurological, debilitating and disabling disorder that should be treated under the care of a specialist with migraine specific medications.

Treating migraines with nonspecific over-the-counter medications has been associated with development of hyper excitable and hypersensitive nervous system, as well as the development of other chronic pain conditions such as fibromyalgia and neck pain, and a progressive worsening of frequency and intensity of migraines.

Fortunately, many migraine specific medications are available; however, there is no single fit. Selection of the right medication should be based on the overall clinical picture, including other medical conditions and prescribed medications. A variety of injections have been helpful in migraine management as well, added to supplements and other modalities.

"Finally, I've found the right explanation for my symptoms; those headaches are not sinus headaches and are not the result of food allergies. They are migraines. I am not disabled by my headaches anymore, because I've gotten the right treatment that let me be in charge of my life. I do not have to be bed ridden in a dark quiet room," said Mrs. S, who has been a headache sufferer since she was 15 years old.

If you have been suffering from debilitating headaches, seek out the services of a specialist for proper diagnosis and treatment.

Dr Nesreen Suwan is a Board Certified Neurologist and Board certified Pain Management Specialist who specializes in treatment of headaches and migraines and is the director of Midwest Specialty Headache Clinic.

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