

Are food intolerances at the root of your migraines?

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"What is food to one man may be fierce poison to another" Lucretius circa 75BC

Despite the advances in modern medicine and our improved standard of living, many people, regardless of age, are spending years of their life in a state of chronic ill-health. Their complaints range from a series of relatively minor health problems right up to being permanently wracked with pain.

We seem to live in a veritable epidemic of: acne, arthritis, autism, bloating, breathing difficulties, depression, eczema, fatigue, IBS, migraine and weight problems - to name just a few. What could be going on?

Many factors affect our health:

- Genetic predisposition
- Accident/illness
- Our sanitised lifestyle indoors means we're less well equipped to handle bacteria and viruses
- Stress and the fast pace of modern life
- Food - which may be laced with antibiotics and pesticides. Where previously foods were eaten 'in season', many are now consumed all year round, losing the natural balance of life that restricted their availability.

As a nutritionist my expertise is with food - probably the most easily controllable, and arguably the most changed from the diet to which we are evolutionarily adapted. Could something in the modern day diet be causing the increase of ill-health?

Adverse reactions to food can be a toxic response, such as to a chemical in food, or plain food poisoning. Or food may provoke an immune/allergic response, either IgE (classical allergies) or IgG (food intolerances).

Classical allergies have long been accepted by mainstream medicine as serious and potentially life-threatening. Affecting 1.5% of the population, and rising, they are characterised by rapid (usually within two hours of exposure) onset of swelling of lips and throat, sudden and violent skin rashes, vomiting and severe breathing difficulties. Immediate medical attention is required - call the emergency services for advice. Well-known triggers are peanuts, but there are others.

Less well-accepted are IgG mediated food intolerances; but according to the British Allergy Foundation an astounding 45% of the UK population are affected - and the figure is rising.

Also known as food sensitivities, these reactions are much harder to self-diagnose as symptoms may only appear up to 72 hours after eating the offending food. They are associated with chronic illness conditions, seen earlier, rather than the sudden, violent reactions of the classical allergy. Diagnosis is further complicated by the fact that often four or five - sometimes more - foods are implicated; sometimes the reaction may be to combinations of food, rather than single sources.

The pathogenic mechanisms by which food intolerance causes chronic illness are not well understood, but it has repeatedly been found that removing offending food from the diet can bring relief from previously intractable symptoms, including migraine.

So - anyone suffering from migraine or other chronic complaints that haven't responded to conventional approaches may do well to consider whether they have developed a food intolerance. But how to find out for sure?

The "gold standard" test is to eliminate the food from the diet, watch the symptoms, then reintroduce it and see what the effect is. However, due to the vast number of foods on offer in our modern diet this approach is time-consuming and hard to comply with. Cytotoxic testing is simpler but requires a full venous blood sample taken by a qualified phlebotomist and some claim it is open to human error.

The ELISA (enzyme linked immuno-sorbent assay) method detects circulating antibodies which recognise and bind to purified food antigens. Requiring just a pin-prick of blood, the test can be done at home, and is scientifically based, specific and accurate. From this tiny sample of blood, computerised methods can test a wide range of foods. However, one drawback was that while 45% of the population may be food intolerant, 55% are not and would get negative results.

Although excellent value for the 45% who successfully identify their problem as a food intolerance, the tests could be thought of as expensive for the 55% who merely found they had no intolerances and were left still needing to pursue other lines of investigation.

However, a new, inexpensive indicator test is available, which will show whether a patient does actually have food intolerances so that armed with this knowledge, patients can decide whether to minimise costs by attempting to identify their problem foods themselves, or with the aid of a nutritionist. Or they may then choose to take one of a variety of tests to more simply pin-point offending foods. (**NOTE:** the indicator test does not identify problem foods, only that the patient has an intolerance that can be further investigated in a variety of different ways.)

A survey, commissioned by the British Allergy Foundation and audited in a UK university, followed up patients who had undertaken a blood test that detected food intolerances. A remarkable 42% (3211) responded and of these 79% had benefited from a significant improvement in symptoms, 70% within 60 days of excluding the indicated food(s). More than 70% had maintained their improved health a year later as the pressure on the immune system was relieved when the offending foods were removed.

Over two thirds of the participants had suffered from multi-symptomatic, long-term illness; their ages ranged from 3 months to 97 years and most had reactions to more than one food - often four or five. 95% praised the ease of use and 87% said they would recommend the test to others.

Muriel Simmons, Chief Executive of the British Allergy Foundation, says "The evidence for this type of food testing is simply too strong to ignore".

The indicator test is a simple first step to better health by determining whether the chronic ill-health problems plaguing you or a member of your family are caused by food intolerance. Your results will be available within 21 days.

Order the test kit on-line at <http://www.nutrition4all.co.uk/ordering.html>