

Migraine and Butterbur

In 2005 24,000 people in America who suffered from headaches and migraine participated in a study carried out by the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. The study involved a survey into the types of medications used to treat their headaches. The researchers chose those who had been diagnosed with fewer than fifteen days of headache per month to see whether they were at risk of developing chronic migraine.

The survey showed that those who used barbiturates and caffeine-containing drugs as pain relief were at risk of developing rebound headaches, also known as medication-overuse headaches. These types of drugs taken to relieve pain, when misused can cause an increase in severity and frequency of the original migraines which are more difficult to treat than common migraines. By 2006, 209 of the people who had taken part in the study had developed chronic migraine.

It is also known that use of these drugs can cause further problems with people who have conditions such as cardiovascular disease and peptic ulcers, as well as pregnant or breast-feeding women. (Adapted from: American Academy of Neurology (2008, April 27). Overuse of Codeine, Oxycodone and Barbiturates Increases Risk Of Chronic Migraine. ScienceDaily.)

Other medications are widely available for preventing migraines but they are rarely wholly successful and they also have numerous side-effects. One of the most common forms of migraine treatments used by doctors is an anti depressant such as Amitriptyline. These are extremely addictive and when a patient stops taking them they may suffer debilitating withdrawal symptoms for many months. This should not be attempted without the supervision of a qualified medical practitioner.

Migraine sufferers are beginning to realise that prescription drugs simply aren't effective unless they continually increase their doses. Finding that the side effects are far too numerous and too uncomfortable to continue treatments, many are now turning to natural remedies which focus on the entire body, not merely the source of pain as is the case with prescription drugs. The side effects from natural remedies are usually less profound and there are no known addictions.

One such remedy is butterbur. "Bartram's Encyclopedia of Herbal Medicine" notes that butterbur is used for migraine of "liver origins". The Butterbur plant grows in Europe, Asia and in parts of North America where extracts from the roots, leaves and flowers have been used as a 'folk remedy' for centuries to treat conditions such as allergies, asthma, stomach cramps and migraines. Butterbur is a member of the ragweed family of plants and anyone who is allergic to daisy, marigold, chrysanthemum or ragweed should not use it, neither should people who have kidney or liver disease, or pregnant women. It should never be used for treating children.

Modern studies suggest that butterbur works by calming spasms in some muscle tissues and reducing inflammation of the walls of blood vessels.

A study, published in Neurology, suggests that use of an extract from Butterbur can reduce the frequency of migraines. The study, conducted by the Yeshiva University in New York,

involved the use of a butterbur extract, Petodolex. The 245 people who took part in the study had experienced between two and six migraine attacks per month during the three months before the trial began. They stopped using their usual migraine-prevention medication at least three months earlier to remove all chemical toxins from their system.

The trial compared the effect of taking butterbur extract over a four month period, using 50mg, 75mg doses twice a day and a placebo.

After four months of treatment, migraine frequency was reduced by 48% in those who used the 75mg dose, with a 26% reduction in the placebo group. Those who took the 50mg dose were found to have a 36% reduction in the frequency of migraines, and researchers felt this was not significantly different from the effects of the placebo. Significantly more people in the 75mg dose group had a 50% reduction in monthly migraine attacks than those in the placebo group. (Adapted from Neurology Dec 2004; 63:2240-4; Press releases from Yeshiva University).

Butterbur is known to have side effects which include indigestion, vomiting, diarrhoea and constipation however, reports from the studies suggested that those using butterbur only reported mild side effects, the most common being burping.

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