

Common Food Triggers for Migraine

Circle foods you eat regularly and eliminate them or reduce to once per week.

Accent seasoning	Fresh beef liver	Pinto beans
Aged meats	Fresh bread	Pizza
Anchovies	Frozen yogurt	Pizza dough
Autolyzed yeast		Plant protein
Avocados	Garbanzo beans	Processed meats
	Gelatin	Protein concentrates
Bacon	Glutamic acid	Protein fortified items
Bagels	Grapefruits and juice	Provolone
Bananas	Gravy	
Beef jerky	Gruyere cheese	Raisins
Blue cheese		Raspberries
Bouillons	Hams	Ready-to-eat meals
Breadcrumbs	Heavy alcohol drinks	Red plums
Brewers yeast	Hot dogs	Red vinegar
Brick cheese	Hydrolyzed protein	Red wine
Brie cheese		Restaurant food
Broad Italian beans	Iced tea	Rice protein
Broth		Romano cheese
Buttermilk	Kombu (seaweed extract)	Roquefort cheese
Calcium caseinate	Lemons and juice	Saccharin
Camembert cheese	Lima beans	Salami
Canned meats	Limes and juice	Salty snacks
Carrageenan	Lentils	Sauerkraut
Caviar	Liverwurst	Sausage
Champagne	Low calorie foods	Seasoned salt
Cheap buffets	Low fat foods	Smoked fish
Cheddar cheese	Lunchmeats	Smoked meats
Cheese spread		Snow peas
Chicken livers	Malt extract	Sodium caseinate
Chinese food	Malted barley	Soft pretzels
Chocolate	Maltodextrin	Soups
Clementines	Marinated meats	Sour cream
Coffee	Mozzarella cheese	Soy products
Coffee cake	MSG	Soy protein
Coffee substitutes	Muenster cheese	Soy protein concentrate
Cola		Soy protein isolate
Croutons	Natural flavors	Soy sauce
Cultured items	Navy beans	Stilton cheese
Cured meats	Nitrates	Sulfites
	Nitrites	Sweet 'n Low
Dark alcohol drinks	Nut butters	
Dates	NutraSweet	Tea
Decaf coffee	Nuts	Tenderized meats
Decaf tea		Textured protein
Doughnuts	Olives	Tyramine
Dried fruits with sulfites	Onions	
	Oranges and juice	Ultra-pasteurized items
Enzyme modified items	Papayas	
	Parmesan cheese	Vegetable protein
Fava beans	Passion fruit	Veggie burgers
Fermented items	Pate	
Fermented meats	Pea pods	Whey protein
Feta cheese	Pepperoni	Wild game
Figs	Pickled fish	Yeast
Flavored snacks	Pickles	Yeast extract
Flavorings	Pineapples and juice	Yogurt

How to use this list:

Migraine triggers may be in our bodies, in the environment and in the foods we eat. A great deal of attention has been paid to food triggers because unlike the other categories of triggers, we have complete control of the foods we eat.

There are hundreds of potential food triggers for migraine. Comprehensive lists of foods which may contribute to triggering migraine can easily be found on the web. In general, these foods fall into two main categories: 1) complex chemical byproducts of food aging and fermentation and 2) foods with chemicals similar to neurotransmitters our brains use. Byproducts of food aging are found in fermented or aged products like red wine, aged cheeses, and yeast in fresh bread, craft beers and yogurt. Foods with chemicals similar to our own neurotransmitters which may aggravate migraine are coffee, chocolate, MSG, and the nitrates used as preservatives in many of our prepackaged foods. Food triggers are not the result of allergy but are direct chemical sensitivities.

There is a common misconception that if a person is sensitive to a food, they will know it because they will have migraine symptoms within an hour of eating that particular item. The word “trigger” implies an all-or-nothing effect that is true only for very strong triggers. Many migraine sufferers can identify one or two such strong and immediate triggers they have learned to avoid. Most triggers are better thought of as “partial triggers” that add up in different ways on different days and that only sometimes contribute to exceeding the threshold that triggers a migraine episode. For example, some migraineurs can eat chocolate or a banana alone with no problem but will suffer a migraine attack if chocolate and a banana are taken on the same day.

Many doctors have stopped recommending food trigger avoidance. The “partial trigger” characteristic, and the extreme variability of triggering foods among patients make it difficult to prove food triggers scientifically. It also takes a lot of effort to convince patients to change food habits, but it is easy to prescribe medications. My view is that the first order of business is to improve symptoms using all available strategies. When you are improved, we can relax and find the minimum treatment needed to keep symptoms at bay.

If you can reduce dietary triggers by 70-80% there will be more room for other partial triggers which we have less control of to add up without causing symptoms. We generally recommend an initial dietary trial which avoids only the most common migraine triggers. If good results are not achieved within a few weeks, a more comprehensive diet which eliminates all potential migraine triggers can be tried, but caution is advised: Our experience with many patients is that those who attempt 100% diet list compliance create stress for themselves and for their families that can be counterproductive as stress is guaranteed to make migraine symptoms worse.

It may take weeks for a patient suffering from severe and debilitating migraine symptoms to respond to food trigger avoidance, but most do. The greatest breakthrough for a chronic migraine patient is the shift from constant to intermittent symptoms. When your symptoms are constant it may be impossible to identify any trigger pattern. When symptoms become intermittent, however, and you have a return of symptoms after a string of good days it becomes possible to examine the last 36 hours and consider what may have been the culprit. If the pattern repeats itself a trigger has been identified. After an improvement in symptoms is achieved, suspect foods can be added to the diet one at a time to see if they are an important trigger for that patient. Despite the work involved, we have found that even the most severely affected migraine sufferers can respond and are generously rewarded for their efforts.

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