

Blinded by the light? Migraines 'a quality of life issue'

Headaches are a big pain, but migraines disrupt your whole life. Lifestyle changes can make all the difference

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By Kathleen Duffy

Waking up with a throbbing headache is frustrating, stressful, and, for some people, completely debilitating. While sufferers can tend to manage tension-type headaches on their own, migraines are a different story.

Alene Brennan, a 32-year-old certified health coach and registered yoga instructor from Mount Laurel, knows firsthand how migraines can impact quality of life.

“I got migraines so severe when I was a child that I often ended up in the ER with severe pain and nausea,” she said. “It’s somewhat unusual to get them at such a young age, but it’s definitely more common in females.”

When a migraine strikes, life can come to a sudden stop.

“The best way I can describe a migraine is feeling like you have brain freeze and the flu all at once,” Brennan said. “It feels like a constant brain freeze and the flu in the sense that you don’t even have the energy to pick your head up off the pillow.

“They are definitely more than just a headache that you get after a stressful meeting,” she added.

Brennan is one of the 43 percent of women who experience migraines during their lifetime, according to Dr. Loretta Mueller, director of the Headache Center at UMDNJ School of Osteopathic Medicine in Stratford.

“It’s such a prevalent condition,” said Mueller. “It really is a quality-of-life issue. We have a lot of therapies that can help.”

Migraine triggers

Many different factors can prompt migraines including ripe aged cheese, MSG, nitrates, caffeine, alcohol, stress, and even the letdown after a stressful day.

“When you can finally relax, that’s when you get the headache,” she said.

Caffeine, in particular, holds a big threat when dealing with migraines. Although small amounts infrequently in medications such as Excedrin can help relieve minor headaches, regularly consuming too much caffeine actually can irritate an already annoying situation.

Dr. Mueller recommends completely removing caffeine from your diet.

“I really think that caffeine is a big, big problem with frequent headaches,” she said. “The problem comes in if you take caffeine every day.” If you miss one day of caffeine infusion, you can set off a headache.

Although, the doctor warns, “things usually will get worse before they get better.” Weaning yourself off the cup of joe over a two to three week time frame can help ease the transition to a caffeine-free life.

Lifestyle changes

It took a complete lifestyle adjustment for Brennan at a formative age to relieve her consistent, intense head pain. Her headaches began in elementary school at the age of 7. She was soon diagnosed by a neurologist to have migraines. Although she was put on medication, she wanted to see what she could personally do to relieve her symptoms.

“I didn’t like the idea that at such a young age I as on daily medicine,” she said. “I worked with my neurologist to take specific medicine that would help me, but I also worked with him to transition off of it as soon as I could. It definitely takes some work.”

When evaluating her condition, her first step was to focus on her eating habits.

“I definitely noticed a strong connection with specific foods I was eating, such as chocolate,” she said. “Once I was able to identify and remove those food triggers, I really noticed a difference.”

Lifestyle habits were the big next step in Brennan’s journey.

“That’s when I started yoga,” she said. “I noticed a big improvement with managing stress levels.”

Dr. William Young, associate professor of neurology and director of the Inpatient Program at Jefferson Headache Center in Philadelphia, said approximately 95 percent of headache patients that come into his office suffer from migraines.

According to Dr. Young, chronic migraines are a very serious disease due to their frequency and severity. “Eighty percent of the people I see have severe headaches every single day,” he said. Some of his patients suffer so badly that they’re incapable of working. “They’re stigmatized. They’re treated badly by employers.”

Controlling the pain

When patients come in for a visit, he goes through four main steps to evaluate how to control the pain. First, he looks into what the patient takes when he or she has a migraine attack. After that, he looks into prevention techniques and medications. He then focuses on the mind — planning for a migraine, recognizing triggers, learning to relax, and arranging a proper sleep schedule. His final step is to look directly at helping the body — focusing on potential neck issues, food consumption and exercise.

“Exercise has shown to be effective,” he said.

Sometimes, general practitioners downgrade migraines as simple headaches, when, according to Dr. Young, if they’re seeking medical advice it’s probably not a tension headache.

“Sinus headache is largely a myth,” he said. “They’re treating migraines as sinus headaches, and people aren’t getting the proper diagnosis.”

Another issue comes into play when sufferers rely too heavily on over-the-counter medications such as Tylenol, Advil or Excedrin. While Excedrin is the best option according to Dr. Young, consuming too much in a short period of time can cause even more problems in the long run.

A medical overuse headache occurs when people take too many medications too often and actually change the pattern of the headaches, thus making them worse.

“It’s a huge public health problem,” he said.

Drug-free alternatives

For those looking to avoid medications to relieve head pain, there are other options, but they are not foolproof.

Vitamin B2, magnesium, Feverfew, and butterbur root all are alternative products that can sometimes help according to Dr. Mueller.

“Get enough sleep. Try to maintain the same schedule every day,” she added.

Don’t skip meals, wake up at the same time in each morning, and look out for food triggers.

“That’s something they can definitely do on their own,” she said.

Brennan went from getting devastating migraines every single weekend as a child to complete relief from symptoms today from a drastic alteration of her lifestyle.

“Knock on wood, I haven’t gotten a debilitating migraine in the last three years,” she said. “Having gone from getting them weekly... to now, not having gotten a debilitating migraine in three years is pretty dramatic.”

There are plenty of reasons why a headache has yet to go away according to Dr. Mueller.

“They come in with a laundry list of what they’ve taken before,” she said. Sometimes the patient wasn’t on the pill long enough. “Nobody maybe got them up to a high enough dose. If they’re still drinking their pot of coffee and take it, the daily medicine we treat with probably is not going to work.”

The right balance

Medication and lifestyle adjustments may need to happen more than once.

“You’re constantly adjusting,” she said. “Patients’ biochemistry do change in time.”

Although it can be a rough, long, slippery slope of life-altering flexibility, the result of being migraine or headache free should never disappear from the horizon.

According to Dr. Mueller, “Even if they haven’t found relief in the past, I would keep trying. Try to find someone that specifically deals with headaches.”

SIDEBAR: FOR MORE INFORMATION

The UMDNJ Headache Center

www.theuniversitydoctors.com/headache

Find a doctor, learn about clinical trials, and search locations in the region through this website. The University Headache Center has been helping patients for the past 20 years.

Thomas Jefferson University’s Headache Center

www.jefferson.edu/headache

Get some general information, learn about services available across the river, search their clinical and non-clinical trials, and find related websites through this headache portal.

American Headache Society

www.americanheadachesociety.org

Gather information to learn more about the cause of your headache. This website includes details for patients, tools to help kick that pain away, and helpful journal articles.

National Headache Foundation

www.headaches.org

The National Headache Foundation is the world's largest voluntary organization for headache sufferers according to their website. They provide information to help battle head pain, blogs, poetry, and a physician finder.

SIDEBAR: Find help in Alene Brennan

Alene Brennan suffered from debilitating migraines for years. These days, she wants to share her techniques and offer hope for others in pain. Her website, www.AleneBrennan.com, was recently launched, in which she gives detailed information about her services as a health coach and yoga instructor. She's a graduate of the Institute for Integrative Nutrition in New York City, which, according to her website, is the only school that focuses on all the major dietary theories. She's also a graduate of the Natural Gourmet Institute's Food Therapy program. On December 5 from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. she will be hosting a class "Natural Relief for Headache and Migraine Pain" at the William G. Rohrer Center in Voorhees for \$5. Her goal with the event is to help individuals understand their headache triggers and find some ways to tolerate and extinguish the pain. Interested participants can register on her website. To contact Alene Brennan directly, either call 609-330-6218 or e-mail alene@alenebrennan.com.