
OPINION COLUMN

Migraines a pain we can all live without

Melissa Carr, 24 hours

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Headaches can be even more unbearable when they appear for no reason.

Colourful, bright lights can be like looking through a prism. For those who get migraines with visual auras this is a familiar experience that brings with it a feeling of dread.

Not all migraine sufferers, however, experience visual auras, and not all auras are as described here. Some other pre-migraine symptoms include blurred vision, loss of vision, irritability, neck stiffness, constipation, tingling in the arms or legs, frequent yawning, depression, food cravings and problems speaking or understanding language.

Most people think of migraines as severe one-sided headaches. This is one type, but not the only type, of migraine. It can be a throbbing head pain accompanied by nausea and vomiting, blurred vision, lightheadedness, and sensitivity to light, sound and smell. Children sometimes experience migraines as stomach aches.

But there are solutions. Preventative measures include identifying and avoiding food triggers such as MSG, artificial ingredients, wine and nitrates from smoked and processed meats. Get enough sleep, manage stress and try cutting back on caffeine.

Preventative treatment is also possible. A British Medical Journal study of 401 adults with chronic headaches, mostly migraines, received acupuncture — up to 12 sessions over three months. This resulted in fewer headaches and medications taken, as well as less visits to the doctor and sick days off work.

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Some common acupuncture points can be pressed for self-acupressure. These include a tender point on the back of the hand, in the

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muscle between the thumb and index finger, called LIV4 or tregu. If the headache is one-sided or at the top of the head, there is a point on the top of the foot, in a tender spot between the big toe and the second toe, called LIV3 or taixi.

Natural remedies include vitamin B2, butterbur, coenzyme Q10 and magnesium. Traditional Chinese medicine also might prescribe herbal combinations that include mint, bupleurum root, goji berries and chrysanthemum flowers, depending on the diagnosis. When seeking help from a TCM practitioner, be prepared to answer questions about your known migraine triggers, food sensitivities, sleep and exercise patterns, family and personal medical history, and what has been successful or not in managing migraines.

While up to 90% of sufferers have a family history of migraines, a future with headaches is not necessarily inevitable.

Melissa Carr is a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, caring for patients in an integrative medicine clinic in Vancouver.

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