



Headaches and the Holidays

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When most people think about the holiday season, they imagine a joyous, family gathering over a special meal, with a fire crackling in the background. Unfortunately, these images may be interrupted by migraine headaches, often associated with nausea and sensitivity to lights and sounds. This leads to disability, with the patient often confined to bed in a quiet, dark room. Not only does the patient miss out on the festivities, but it affects the rest of the family as well.

Migraine is a disease which is oftentimes underdiagnosed, and inappropriately treated. There are more than 28 million migraineurs in the United States, approximately 75% of which are young, healthy females. Migraine is a chronic illness which affects the patient's quality of life.

Many patients experience their most severe and frequent migraines during the holiday season. Looking carefully at common triggers may prevent the headache and its associated impairment.

The holiday season is a stressful time of year. Shopping in crowded malls, cooking that exceptional meal, entertaining relatives, and additional chores around the house can create extra tension. With time off, patients under or oversleep, forget to get their morning caffeine, and have a day that lacks the usual structure, all common migraine triggers. Alcohol and being too busy to exercise add to the mix. For some, family get-togethers may stir up unresolved conflicts and can lead to anxiety, and even depression.

Non-pharmacological therapy including recognition of triggers, general wellness, adequate sleep, and maintaining a routine may be enough for some patients. Recognition of headache precipitants may be facilitated by using a headache calendar. This may also help discover patterns, such as weekend or menstrual migraines that the patient never identified. Reminding patients that they do not impose unreasonable on themselves expectations may help prevent a migraine occurrence. However, others may require abortive prescription medications, including the triptan class. These drugs are unique because they are migraine specific and not only treat the pain, but the associated symptoms as well. Of course, all patients should be evaluated for their attendant risk factors and other contraindications before using these drugs.

A decision on the most appropriate therapy often requires patient input. A tailored treatment plan can lead to a decrease in migraine frequency and a more enjoyable holiday season.