

Migraine Trigger Guide:

Alcohol

Explanation

Alcohol causes headaches for people who don't experience migraine.

If you are susceptible to migraine and you drink alcohol, it is almost always a contributing factor. It is one of the least disputed triggers for migraine because it is so common.

Headaches that come the day after consuming alcohol are called hangover headaches or alcohol-induced headaches.

Alcoholic beverages contain ethanol. Ethanol is clear and colorless with a sweet flavor and a smell that some people find pleasant. Ethanol is made by fermenting sugars. When a person drinks an alcoholic beverage, the ethanol is quickly absorbed in the stomach. The ethanol is distributed into the bloodstream and then into the brain's nerve cells. The ethanol is distributed throughout the body. As it circulates, 90 percent of the ethanol is processed by the liver.

Ethanol is a drug that acts on the brain, liver, kidneys, heart, stomach, blood vessels, hormones and other bodily systems. Ethanol also serves as a depressant and suppresses certain brain functions.

Trigger causes

Alcohol triggers include anything which contains alcohol.

The more complicated answer is that it may not be that simple. Not all alcohol is equally destructive for people with migraine.

Different types of alcohol appear to affect people differently and even scientific research shows conflicting results. Whether the alcohol itself (ethanol) or the chemicals in alcohol, such as tyramine and histamine, cause the migraine attack is still not known for certain.

Many suspect the ingredients that interact with brain chemicals are to blame, i.e. tyramine and histamine. Other common ingredients are sulphites (or sulfites) which are used often as preservatives. These ingredients can lead to headaches and in some

people trigger attacks.

Headaches typically occur the morning after drinking alcohol, when the alcohol level in the body falls. People who suffer from migraine are more likely than the average person to experience hangover headaches.

One 2004 study of 1,122 people found that men are more likely to experience alcohol-induced headaches than women.

Regarding wine, different studies report different findings on which type triggers the most migraine attacks. For example, a European study found that 11 percent of migraine sufferers pointed to red wine as the most common culprit. However, a French study showed that 54 percent of the alcohol-induced migraine attacks came after drinking white wine.

Histamine, which may be responsible for triggering migraine attacks, is found in far higher quantities in red wine than in white. Red wine contains 20 to 200 times the amount of histamine than white wine. Women are more likely to have migraine attacks triggered by red wine than men.

As a general rule of thumb:

- The higher quality the ingredients, the better (i.e. triple distilled premium vodka versus the cheapest bottle at the store).
- Darker alcohols are often stronger and may have other coloring or preservatives (but not always).
- Be careful with champagne, this is a known trigger for many people.
- White wine appears to be less problematic than red (but not for some).

If you're unsure, then the best way is to simply avoid alcohol or save it for special occasions only. On these occasions, make sure you minimize your other triggers, keep your medication close by, and drink plenty of water that night and the next morning to manage your risk.

How do you know if this is an issue?

Alcohol can provoke two types of headache in migraine patients: an attack within a few hours or a delayed hangover headache.

If you are getting headaches or migraine attacks within a few hours to any time over the next few days after consuming alcohol, then alcohol could be playing a role.

Options to try

The most obvious solution is to stop drinking alcohol.

Instead, treat yourself to your favorite dessert or snack, or give yourself a reward each time you make a good decision for your health.

Drinking a glass of wine is sometimes suggested by some health professionals; it is not recommended to everyone, especially if that glass triggers attacks.

But for some, alcohol does have a balanced and enjoyable role in their life. Ideally they'd like to be able to enjoy a glass or two on occasion. If you experience chronic migraine (15 days or more with migraine), it is worthwhile to seriously consider going off alcohol at least for a month to see what impact it might have.

If your migraine attacks are less frequent and you still want to be able to drink, then consider some of the following:

- Learn which alcohol suits you best.
- Take it easy and slow. Drinking puts you at greater risk of an attack. But if you can discover, for example, that you can't drink wine but you seem OK with one glass of vodka and soda, then that might be helpful.
- Know your limits:
 - Binge drinking on any alcohol can cause problems whether you have migraine or not. Binge drinking occurs when you have more than 4 drinks per night for women or 6 for men.
- Keep your medication handy. If you are going to experiment, be prepared for the worst. Have your meds and a backup plan if things go wrong.

Watch-outs

Our relationship with alcohol and migraine can change over time. Often our bodies change — this can include previously "safe" alcohols becoming triggers.

For those with frequent attacks, it is advisable to avoid all alcohol. It may be just another stressor that the body doesn't need right now. Rebuild your migraine threshold. Then when you're feeling better you can make an informed and balanced decision about alcohol.

For those who can manage and really prefer to drink, learn what works for you, take it slow, and know what your limits are.

More reasons to manage this trigger

The list of reasons not to drink at all, or modestly, far outweigh the reasons to drink.

Even a moderate amount of alcohol:

- Interferes with many medications.



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- Affects your sleep. It might be easier to fall asleep but the quality of sleep is affected. Many people wake up earlier.
- Alcohol also reduces your ability to get into deep restful sleep. This alone could be a migraine trigger.
- It also puts pressure on your liver which may already be under stress from frequent migraine medications or treatments.

Consuming too much alcohol can increase your risk of other conditions such as:

- Liver disease
- High blood pressure
- High blood fats (triglycerides)
- Heart failure
- Stroke
- Fetal alcohol syndrome (if you're pregnant)
- Certain cancers
- Diabetes and obesity
- Injury, violence, and death