Migraine Trigger Guide:

Exercise

Explanation

When physical exertion, movement, activity, or overheating triggers a migraine attack.

Trigger causes

- Walking up or downstairs.
- Bending over or rising up.
- Physical exertion — intense cardio activity, lifting heavy objects or weights, vigorous workout.
- Head movement or pressure changes (i.e. coughing or sneezing). See Weather Trigger Guide for atmospheric pressure changes.

Physical activity may lead to migraine attacks for several reasons including:

- Dehydration.
- Extreme activity or overexertion.
- Heat.
- Altitude, which might prompt migraine attacks because of low oxygen.
- Low blood sugar.

How do you know if this is an issue?

If you are concerned that any kind of physical activity, exercise, or certain movements may trigger a migraine attack or if they have repeatedly triggered attacks in the past.

Options to try

Like many things, exercise can be a double-edged sword for those vulnerable to migraine attacks.

Experts recommend exercise as an important component of a migraine prevention plan. Yet a small portion of patients find exertion to be a frequent trigger of their attacks.

Below are some tips for managing this delicate balance:
● Warm up first: If you’re dusting off old runners, take it easy. Give yourself a slow start. Stretch first. Remember to gently cool down as well.

● Pace yourself: Pay attention to how you’re feeling on a particular day and exercise accordingly. Exercise can be going for a light stroll, gentle stretching, or something more vigorous if you’re feeling up to it.

● Build up gradually: When you’re starting a new exercise routine, start small. If you haven’t been doing any kind of exercise, anything is an improvement. You don’t need to wreck yourself so you can’t move for days afterward. Take it slowly and work up to more intense workouts. The migraine brain doesn’t like change and responds better to gradual transitions than it does to drastic changes.

● Watch your other triggers: Triggers stack on top of each other. Having one trigger alone may not lead to an attack but exposure to several triggers at once is more likely to cause problems. If you’ve been exposed to other triggers be careful about overdoing it with exercise that day. Take it easy or take the day off.

● Keep hydrated: Make sure you drink plenty of water before, during, and after any kind of workout. Dehydration is a common migraine trigger. When you exercise, your body needs to replace larger amounts of water.

● Aim for low impact: Exercises like cycling or swimming can be ideal to get an aerobic workout without the migraine-inducing intensity that comes from higher impact activities like running or aerobics. Walking is also a great option to get your heart pumping without increasing your chances of bringing on a migraine attack. Gentle stretching and yoga are also helpful options to move your body without exerting it in a way that is likely to trigger an attack.

● Be conscious of your environment: If you have other triggers such as allergies, altitude, bright lights such as sunlight, or weather factors such as heat, then be prepared. Avoid the route that involves high altitudes, wear sunglasses, take something for your allergy before you go outside.

For people who experience persistent migraine attacks, many doctors recommend exercise as a way of controlling migraine naturally.

Exercise has been shown to be an effective preventive to help people living with migraine have fewer, shorter, less intense migraine attacks.¹ This doesn’t mean you

should exercise in the middle of an attack, but it does mean gradually and slowly incorporating exercise into your lifestyle.

Exercise can reduce stress, help with relaxation, and help balance many chemicals and functions within the body.

Exercise also causes the brain to release endorphins, which act as the body’s natural painkillers. Endorphins and exercise improve mood and decrease the body’s perception of pain.

Many of us may become frustrated when asked by their doctors to exercise. Understand that your doctor is not asking you to exercise during a migraine attack, but during times when you can tolerate whatever exercise type you have chosen.

Remember that today you may feel like walking briskly, but tomorrow a little deep breathing may be all that your body can handle. Yes, vigorous aerobic exercise is better for us, but doing something small is better than doing nothing at all. Moreover, mixing things up is actually better for our bodies so they don’t become accustomed to any one particular style of exercise.

Watch-outs

There are some people who should not participate in exercise for migraine. If in doubt, check with your doctor before starting a new exercise regimen.

Exercise may make certain conditions worse, including:

- Cold or flu
- Fever
- Asthma, a recent attack
- Recent concussion
- Sharp pains
- Back pain
- Osteoporosis

Pregnant women should discuss safe forms of exercise with their doctor first.

Stop exercising immediately if you experience chest pain or any chest discomfort. See your doctor before you resume.

More reasons to manage this trigger

To stay healthy, most people should exercise at least 30 minutes most days.

Exercise includes anything from walking, running, and swimming to high impact
Exercise has shown to be beneficial for migraine.

Research has also shown exercise can help:

- Lower blood pressure
- Lower blood sugar
- Lose weight
- Increase metabolism
- Improve sleep
- Improve mood
- Increase energy
- Reduce risk of heart disease
- Reduce risks of some cancers
- Strengthen bones and muscles

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