

DEAR *migraine* DIARY

HOW I TAMED
MY HEADACHES AND
GOT MY LIFE BACK

by Grace Gold
photo by Julia Noni

If you've ever had a migraine or seen one through the eyes of a loved one, you know that they truly amount to a *terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day*.

Migraines aren't simply headaches. They're characterized by severe pain commonly concentrated on one side of the head or behind the eyes, and may be accompanied by extreme sensitivity to light, sounds, and smells, plus nausea, vomiting, aches, fatigue, and even difficulty speaking and numbness on one side of the body. Some people also experience visual aura beforehand, with flashing lights, floating spots, and temporary vision loss.

It's not exactly a party—but ironically, it was a party where I experienced my first full-blown migraine.

I was 12, and it was after my church confirmation (mom is Christian, dad is Jewish, if you're wondering about that by-line). My parents had taken our family and friends out to a diner to celebrate, because that is what you do in New Jersey. But my head had not felt right since I had placed that papery communion wafer on my tongue and taken a sip of the red sacramental wine at the altar. For most of the party—and the next three days—I was in the bathroom, with pounding pain and overwhelming nausea.

Over the next 15 years, I spent many days in dark bedrooms as the migraines went from a couple times a month in middle

school, to a few times a month in high school, to several times a month as a journalism student at New York University, and finally a peak of up to 15 days a month post-college. (The latter is classified as *chronic daily migraine*.) Through it all, I managed to excel at whatever I was handling during the day, but would always be counting down the minutes to when I could drag myself home to a hot bath, bed, and pain pills.

I saw many neurologists. One said I gave the migraines to myself, as many “Type A” women do, and told me to relax more; he didn't have an answer when I asked why they often worsen during vacations. Others were sincere and tried to help with more prescriptions—but the frequency only continued to get worse with each year. I began to think I was allergic to parties in particular, since no holiday or fête ever ended in anything but a foggy “thank you” to my host, followed by a throbbing collapse into bed. But I soon learned it wasn't the celebrations that were the problem—it was the food I was eating at them.

Luckily for me, the Internet had arrived just in time. Unsatisfied with doctors' answers, I would constantly Ask Jeeves (remember?) about migraines and read forums where, for the first time, I found other people going through the same thing. I eventually surfed upon the concept of keeping a “migraine diary,” which catalogs happenings on headache days: what did you eat, what was the weather like, how much sleep had you logged, how much water did you drink? I soon began diligently keeping one. And then slowly—over many, many years—I dis-



covered that a lot of foods kept corresponding with migraines. Sure, doctors had breezily mentioned some of the major well-known offenders—red wine, chocolate, aged cheeses like sharp cheddar—but my list went far beyond these top three.

Foods including onions and garlic (and all fellow *allium* family members, like scallions, chives, and leeks); preservatives like nitrates/nitrites found in hot dogs, cold cuts, and bacon; tyramine in many cured charcuterie staples; MSG, often found in that delightfully oily Chinese takeout; all sorts of fruit—dried fruit, oranges, apples, overripe bananas, and even fruit juice; nuts like walnuts and pecans; most alcohol except for white wine; aspartame; and soda were all highly problematic for me. I discovered most sauces, dressings, and condiments were stealth offenders because they often contained onion or garlic powder. My diary also made it clear that going too long between meals and not drinking at least eight glasses of water a day were major catalysts.

Other triggers I learned I'm very sensitive to are not enough or too much sleep, hormonal changes during my period, bright sunshine, tying my hair up tightly, and sudden barometric pressure changes during intense summer or winter storms.

No wonder I was getting a migraine, like, every day.

But it was identifying and cutting food triggers that gave much of my life back. Experts aren't sure why some foods cause headaches, though they have some theories. "Foods containing tyramine have been thought to trigger headaches by reducing serotonin levels in the brain and affecting the dilation of blood vessels. Tannins in wine may possibly effect cortical spreading depression—a phenomenon characterized by a wave of excitation spreading over nerve cells in the brain, followed by a period of relaxation, that can trigger migraines. Too little or too much caffeine has been consistently shown to cause migraines, which may be due to withdrawal and changes that occur in blood vessels," explained Brian M. Grosberg, M.D., my doctor at Montefiore Headache Center in New York—who has spent many hours reading and helping interpret my migraine diary.

Migraineurs, as those of us with the illness are called, can have one, a few, or several food triggers—or may even win the thanks-a-lot lottery and happen to have nearly all of them like yours truly. I've been blessed, however, to have no trouble with eggs, avocado, or beans (in moderation), which can set off other chronic sufferers. And here's what I've learned: Strong food sensitivities can bring a migraine on straight-away, while moderate ones may act as the tipping point when you have other triggers (like not enough sleep or your period).

Once you've identified your triggers, staying away from them can sometimes pose a challenge. Try, for example, ordering off a menu when you're avoiding onions and garlic. About 40 percent of the time, I still end up with them anyway. Often a server places a plate in front of me and declares, "No onions!" and I look down to see a dish speckled in a layer of green chive garnish. I always pre-read menus and email the restaurant if I have ingredient questions before dining out, and I carry protein bars and patience with me just in case. I snack on a boiled egg or banana before parties, so I'm not tempted by gnawing hunger to taste anything unfamiliar. Parties are, after all, trigger fests from beginning to end, and sugary drinks, passed hors d'oeuvres, and wooden board spreads can be especially lethal.

Along the research journey, anti-inflammatory eating made a heroic appearance in my life. I found out that foods like dark green leafy vegetables (think kale, spinach, chard); omega-3 rich fish like salmon; green tea; and spices like turmeric, ginger, cinnamon, and clove are all superstars that can help heal and prevent chronic pain by lowering levels of inflammation in the body. They're so powerful that heaping them into my diet actually strengthens my system in the face of triggers so that I'm less sensitive.

But here's the thing. Anti-inflammatory eating is as much about what you *don't* eat as it is about what you *do* eat. Womp, womp. And this next sentence is among the saddest you'll ever read. Sugar, gluten, and dairy are the most inflammation-causing foods. I know. This is New York, after all—where our large triangle-blistered pizza slices and toasted cream cheese bagels are legendary. And is there anything that goes better with a latté than a perfectly buttery croissant? Oh wait, there is—a chocolate one.

I believed that the sugar and gluten thing didn't apply to me for a long time. I just couldn't face eliminating so many things I loved. But then, as the career I worked so hard on blossomed and added more trigger challenges to my life, I was led to the kind of breakdown I needed for a breakthrough. After cutting out dairy, sugar, and gluten, a fog I didn't know existed was lifted from my brain, and I became undeniably stronger against my triggers. I could have a night of less sleep and not have to pay for it, or encounter other sensitivities like stormy weather and rude tri-state drivers without swelling blood vessels. I could even tolerate some garlic.

Now, I haven't completely eliminated sugar, dairy, and gluten as a hard rule—I still indulge when I'm eating out sometimes—but I don't bring any of them into my regular daily routine or kitchen. Cutting down on my intake has given me more control over my body. I can do the kinds of things I watched other people do—like keeping a busy schedule, traveling, and enjoying long days at the beach under the warm, bright sun.

An anti-inflammatory lifestyle goes beyond just diet, too. Yoga, meditation, stretching, and exercise that incorporates toning and cardio are all potent practices that flood the body with an anti-inflammatory response. So is not sweating the small stuff that paradoxically leads to the big stuff. I start my morning with a Vega One nutritional shake, blended with almond milk (you can use any milk), that is chock-full of anti-inflammatory nutrients like six servings of greens and vegan probiotics to strengthen my defenses. Then I work out, stretch, and meditate before starting work. It doesn't hurt that this routine makes skin glow and the body look good, too. It also makes me a kinder human being.

Today, I've cut my migraines by about 75 percent. That's nearly unheard of for a chronic daily patient. If I lived in a perfectly controlled bubble, I could probably push it closer to 100 percent. But the ones that I do get I'm able to treat immediately with a medicinal plan I've created with my doctor, and I can go on living fully.

Traditional medicine and holistic worlds often don't respect each other or work well together, which is a shame because it's been a blend of both that has led to my healing. Either one alone hasn't cut it for me; I've tried either/or many times.

I take preventative supplements like vitamin B6 (riboflavin) and turmeric daily, along with a couple of low doses of preventative medications, and incorporate all of the lifestyle choices I outlined above. My doctor is open to my holistic explorations, and I highly recommend that you find a doctor who is, too.

We're all given certain blessings in life. And discovering that your greatest challenge exists to guide you to a higher personal path of learning and an even deeper sense of empathy for others can be the greatest blessing of all. Migraines have been a part of what made me who I am, but they no longer define me.

PAIN RELIEF TEA

2 cups water
½ tablespoon turmeric powder
½ tablespoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon raw peeled ginger root
pinch of clove
pinch of nutmeg
splash of non-dairy milk (coconut, almond, and hemp work great)
stevia or raw honey to sweeten

Bring the water to a boil on the stovetop, then turn it down to a simmer and add the spices. Allow to simmer for 10 minutes. Strain into a big cup and add the non-dairy milk and natural sweetener. Stir.

NOTES: As your palate acclimates to turmeric, you can increase the amount for even more benefits. Turmeric is a wonderful healing spice for any chronic pain condition—from migraines to rheumatoid arthritis and even irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

GRACE'S AMAZING AÇAÍ BOWL

1 Sambazon unsweetened pure açai smoothie pack (frozen)
½ cup unsweetened almond milk
1 small ripe banana
hemp granola
fruit of choice to top

Blend the açai pack, almond milk, and ripe banana together. (I defrost the açai for a bit first so that it blends more easily.) Pour into the bottom of a bowl. Top with granola and your choice of fruit.

NOTES: In addition to being a super antioxidant fruit, açai also contains a flavonoid called velutin that has been shown in studies to inhibit inflammation. This makes an energizing breakfast or delicious afternoon/evening snack! Sliced strawberries, diced mangoes, and blueberries work especially well as fruit toppings; I buy and keep all three frozen in the off-season. I sometimes use frozen bananas for a chilled, more smoothie-like base. Hemp

granola is naturally gluten-free, though there is a small chance of cross-contamination; for the purpose of anti-inflammatory eating, it's perfectly fine—but those with serious gluten intolerances should use a certified alternative.

CREAMY CARROT PUMPKIN PAIN PREVENTION SOUP

3 cups chopped carrots
2 cups soup broth of choice
1 cup 100% pumpkin purée (canned is fine)
1 cup unsweetened almond milk
1½ tablespoon peeled ginger root
½ tablespoon turmeric powder
½ tablespoon ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon natural maple syrup
salt to taste

Combine all the ingredients in a food processor or blender. Taste and add more spices if necessary, keeping in mind that everything will marry when warmed. Heat in a pot over a medium-low flame for several minutes.

NOTES: I use Himalayan salt, which has a greater concentration of anti-inflammatory minerals than other salts and isn't as processed. As your palate adjusts to turmeric and cinnamon, feel free to add more of either pain prevention star.

NO CHOCOLATE, NO PROBLEM DATE BITES

1 carton of fresh Medjool dates
½ teaspoon vanilla extract
organic shredded coconut
crushed almonds or pistachios (optional)

Remove the pits and hard tops of the dates, and place in a food processor or strong blender with the vanilla extract until a very sticky "dough" forms. (I'm able to do this in my Vitamix a few dates at a time, set on low.) Form into balls, and then roll over shredded coconut to coat. Store in an airtight container in the fridge.

NOTES: I used to cry because I couldn't have chocolate, but now I rejoice because I can have these, which have a fraction of the fat and no refined sugar or dairy. It's also popular to roll the dates in crushed almond or pistachio before finishing with the coconut; whole nuts are often migraine triggers, but can make a tasty option for family and friends.

For guidance from Montefiore on how to keep a migraine diary, visit: bit.ly/diarymigraine.