

# How to be headache-free



**What a feeling:** Things are looking up for headache sufferers, thanks to these natural therapies that really work.

**Don't suffer—new remedies can keep you smiling.**

*By Melanie Haiken*

If you've ever felt like King Kong was squeezing your head with a giant pair of pliers, you're probably willing to take just about anything to banish a bad headache. Strangely, though, a recent study found that more than half of the 30 million Americans who suffer from the worst kind of headache pain take only over-the-counter remedies—or nothing at all. If you're in that unhappy group, here's news you can use: Doctors now believe an

unorthodox remedy such as a B vitamin or a series of Botox injections may help get that big ape off your back (head, actually) for good. "In the last few years, many clinics have begun recommending alternative therapies," says Robert Kaniecki, MD, director of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Headache Center. "They're becoming more popular with doctors as studies document their effectiveness."

How they work isn't entirely clear. But the risks appear to be minimal, and the payoffs could be huge. Here's our guide to the remedies that experts find most promising.

## Get your Bs

In people who suffer from frequent headaches such as migraines, tests show their brains seem to be consistently low on energy. That leads to painful overreactions when the brain is pushed—by things like bright lights, loud sounds, or lack of sleep. Riboflavin, a B vitamin that helps release energy from carbohydrates, appears to help solve the problem, Kaniecki says. While the recommended daily intake for a healthy adult woman is only about 1 milligram, a high dose (400 mg daily) cut the frequency of migraine attacks by nearly 60 percent in one study, and there are no known risks from taking that much. You have to use it daily for at least a month before you'll see results, because your body needs time to adjust. But waiting won't cost much: A bottle of 100 mg supplements, good for almost a month, sells for about \$6.99 at most drugstores and is available for less on the Internet.

## Magna magnesium

Like riboflavin, magnesium also seems to correct brain hypersensitivity, the tendency to overreact to stress. The

dose needed is considerably more than the 50 mg in once-a-day vitamins; patients took up to 800 mg daily in studies that found significant reductions in the number of days with headaches, and in the intensity of pain. That amount may cause diarrhea or gas in people with sensitive stomachs, but taking a calcium-magnesium combo pill can offset these side effects. Both magnesium and calcium-magnesium supplements are available at pharmacies for \$10 or less. And give it at least a month, preferably 3 months, before deciding if it's worth it, experts say.

### The butterbur effect

Butterbur, an herb, has been used for centuries by Europeans to treat fever, asthma, and inflammation. Now, thanks to a convincing study published in *Neurology* last year, headache clinics around the country are using an extract from its roots, called Petasites. Patients who took 75 mg twice a day for 4 months cut their incidence of migraine attacks almost in half. "That's a very respectable showing for a natural product," says Richard Lipton, MD, professor of neurology, psychiatry, and epidemiology at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and a *Health* Editorial Advisory Board member. The dosage is important: A second group that took 50 mg twice a day got no benefit.

The mechanism? Butterbur may prevent spasms of the blood vessels in your head, Lipton says, and curb inflammation inside the vessels. The only side effect of taking the herb appears to be an unfortunate tendency to burp. The brand used in the study, Petadolex, is available only in 50 mg capsules; take one three times a day. Look for it in drugstores, health-food stores, and on the Internet.

### Do the Q

Co-enzyme Q<sub>10</sub>, an antioxidant found in meat and nuts, may also crank up your brain's ability to use energy. "The data are very encouraging," says Mark Green, MD, clinical professor of neurology at Columbia University and co-author of *Managing Your Headaches*. In a study published recently in *Neurology*, researchers gave 42 patients either co-Q<sub>10</sub> or a placebo and found that the antioxidant reduced the frequency of attacks by 47 percent, as well as the amount of nausea. In another study, roughly 60 percent of users experienced a dramatic reduction in headaches. Side effects seem to be nonexistent—except for the hole it creates in your purse. A 1-month supply of co-Q<sub>10</sub> for headaches will run you \$40 to \$60, and you'll need to take a fairly high dose (300 mg every day) for at least 2 months before you can expect to feel better. Because of the price, experts recommend buying it wherever it's sold in bulk; the Internet may be your best bet.

### A new use for Botox

For some migraineurs, a shot of Botox, or botulinum toxin A, works extremely well, says John Rothrock, MD, neurologist and editor of *Headache*, the journal of the American Headache Society. A new Mayo Clinic study found that Botox cut by more than half the number of headaches suffered by people who get migraines 15 or more days per month. Another study found that 80 percent of patients had fewer and less-severe headaches after being injected with Botox, while 60 percent rated it as an "excellent" or "good" form of pain relief. But this remedy, the same substance used cosmetically to eliminate wrinkles, doesn't slay headaches by forcibly relaxing or paralyzing muscles. Instead, experts say, it seems to block pain signals

to the brain. Injections are usually applied at numerous sites in the scalp and neck every 2 to 3 months. A big drawback: It's \$1,000 per treatment, and insurers usually won't cover the cost. Many headache clinics, including those at Columbia in New York and at University of Pittsburgh, offer Botox therapy; check with your local hospital or ask your neurologist for a referral.

### A pain-piercing approach

A different kind of needle may be just as effective. In a recent study, German insurance companies followed 15,000 headache patients and found that those getting acupuncture in addition to over-the-counter pain remedies suffered 44 percent fewer headaches than those relying on medication alone. But in keeping with the mystery behind all forms of non-Western medicine, how and why acupuncture works is unknown. Another recent study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* compared it with so-called sham acupuncture, in which needles are inserted at sites not usually used by an acupuncturist, and found both methods equally effective at combating migraines. No one's sure how to explain that, but having your body repeatedly stuck with needles certainly seems to help. Experts believe the real thing is effective enough to be added to the arsenal of available treatments in many reputable headache clinics. Their advice: Find an acupuncturist who specializes in headaches, and expect to continue regular sessions for several months. The American Academy of Medical Acupuncture ([www.medicalacupuncture.org](http://www.medicalacupuncture.org)) can refer you to acupuncturists with MD degrees. 📍

*Melanie Haiken, the former health editor of Parenting, writes frequently about alternative medicine.*