

## Alternative Medicines and Headache

There are a number of alternative remedies suggested for migraine. These are the commonest and the ones with the most evidence.

They are not available on prescription and would need to be bought privately; most recognised health shops would have them.

### Magnesium

Magnesium is a natural part of the body and is needed as part of a healthy diet. It comes in cereal, nuts, spices, coffee, tea and vegetables.

There is evidence that some people with migraine have too low a level of magnesium; this may be the case especially with menstrual migraine.

Two studies have shown that migraine supplements can help in preventing migraine. Higher doses of 600mg may be needed over 3 to 4 months. So the suggested dose is 600mg daily

Side effects are not common but diarrhoea can occur; it stops if the magnesium is stopped or reduced. Magnesium citrate may be less likely to cause it.

### Co-enzyme Q10

Co-enzyme Q10 is a chemical in the body closely linked to the production of energy in cells. It is also an antioxidant, clearing up "waste products" from cells.

It is found in oily fish (e.g. salmon, tuna), offal like liver, and whole grains and usually you obtain enough in your diet.

Some minor side effects have been reported including a burning feeling in the mouth, nausea and diarrhoea

It is advised not to take in pregnancy.

Studies have looked at 150 to 300 mg daily; overall there was about 50% improvement in 50% of people over 3 to 4 months. Currently suggested dose is 100mg three times a day.

### Riboflavin

Riboflavin is vitamin B2. It has a very similar role to Co-enzyme Q10 and is found in meat, eggs, green vegetables, cereals and dairy products.

The study looking at migraine showed a 50% reduction over 3 months in 59% of participants. The dose was 400mg a day and there were few side effects apart from a slight yellow discoloration of the urine, passing urine more and diarrhoea

Alcohol and oestrogen may affect riboflavin levels; high doses of riboflavin (higher than suggested here) can affect the medication methotrexate.

### Butterbur

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There are different types of butterbur, a fleshy creeping plant of the Asteraceae family, and the medicinal one is Butterbur Petasin. Extract of the root is used. In its natural form it is toxic and can only be used when purified.

When choosing a brand ensure the plant used is Petasin. The active ingredients are petasin and isopetasin. Do not use teas, capsules of raw herb or unprocessed tinctures or extracts.

One trial used 50mg of standardised Butterbur extract (7.5mg petasin and isopetasin); it showed a 60% reduction in headache and also reduced intensity but it only looked at 2 months. Another used 75mg twice daily showing a 50% reduction in 68% of people over 3 months.

The suggested dose is 50 to 75 mg twice a day (with at least 7.5mg petasin and isopetasin).

There weren't noticeable side effects but there is no long term data. It is not recommended in pregnancy.

There weren't noticeable side effects but there is no long term data. It is not recommended in pregnancy. Some butterbur products may contain pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PAs), and these are a major safety concern. These compounds can damage the liver, and lungs. Do not use butterbur products unless they are certified and labelled as free of pyrrolizidine alkaloids

### Feverfew

Feverfew is a herb traditionally used for headache pain and fever. It is another member of the Asteraceae family.

One study suggested a 24 % reduction in headache over 6 months.

Doses are not clear – some studies have looked at chewing leaves, others 6.25mg of a prepared product.

Side effects include mild stomach upset, increased heart rate and mouth ulcers if chewing leaves. There have been some concerns about the effect on the liver and is not recommended to take in diabetes, liver conditions, alcohol dependence or with anticoagulant drugs

It is definitely not safe in pregnancy as it can induce womb contractions.

### Homeopathy

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Homeopathy is the use of highly diluted natural substances to enhance the body's own system of healing. The remedies used are very specific to the person.

There have been some trials looking at headache; one very positive, one negative and two equivocal. It is difficult to assess in trials because of the number of different remedies used.

It is safe in pregnancy. The two national registers for homeopaths are the Faculty of Homeopathy (for medical professionals who are also homeopaths) and the Society of Homeopaths; anyone giving advice should be registered with one of these.

### Others

Ginger has been used in nausea with migraine.

St Johns Wort can interact with Triptans so it is not advised to take them together and isn't usually suggested as a preventative for migraine.

Capsaicin (cayenne pepper extract); one study has suggested using this topically in acute migraine attacks as well as for prevention.

Mustard. One of the oldest remedies for headache is mustard, used in the bath. Perhaps not surprisingly there has never been a study on this!

### Pregnancy

To reiterate advice above - although intuitively we may feel that "natural remedies" are ok in pregnancy, in fact there is no evidence for their safety (apart from homeopathy); we cannot advise using them at the moment.

### Interaction with other medicines

If you are taking other medication it is important to double check with your pharmacist or GP whether they can interact with any herbal or alternative medicines.

### References

Migraine action [www.migraine.org.uk](http://www.migraine.org.uk)

Herbal treatment of headache. Morris Levin. Headache 2012; 52; S2:76-80