

# How Do I Discuss Lifestyle Recommendations With My Migraine Patient?

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Many physicians appreciate the importance of educating patients on lifestyle changes, but with the limited time for clinical visits, some may find approaching the topic challenging. Here are some ways to approach recommending lifestyle changes for your headache patient.

## Effective Lifestyle Approaches for Patients

A key approach is educating patients on the importance of connecting with the daily circadian rhythm, along with the nocturnal rhythm, to improve the functioning of the nervous system. This involves an understanding that for our brain to be less reactive and less triggered by foods, weather, hormones and environment, we must establish a routine for our nervous system that honors predictability and certainty. Circadian medicine honors the concept that if we live in alignment with mother nature, our system is more able to sustain more stress placed upon it. Here are some lifestyle approaches that are based on this principle.

### Step 1: Address the Acute Pain

The key to this step is appreciating the importance of acute needs. Remember, your patients are seeing you first and

foremost because of their cycles of head pain. Often they feel misunderstood, underappreciated and in desperate need to find solutions for their pain. They may be losing time with family, friends and work due to their pain. Most patients have tried over-the-counter products before seeing us for their condition. Years may have passed where they have tried multiple approaches, pharmacological and non-pharmacological, which have not been effective. If we can comfort them by providing the most appropriate acute approach for their current pain, we have addressed their immediate need and can move to Step 2.

#### Suggested Goal

Recommend a migraine specific medication, or over-the-counter/non-pharmacological, if consistent and effective, based on clinical judgement with highest benefit to risk ratio. Encourage reduction and even avoidance of over-the-counter medications if used in excess (more than 10 times per month). Monitor for success in aborting pain with limited to no side effects and minimal re-dosing with the abortive tool. If patients are unable to manage with the abortive tool in limited amounts or without bothersome side effects, consider prevention.

## Step 2: Focus on Establishing a Healthy Sleep Routine

The daytime circadian pattern is established with a proper nighttime routine. One of the most important conversations to have is about the maintenance of a nightly bedtime routine. The goal is to obtain seven to eight hours of sleep at minimum to restore the brain.

Based on clinical studies, we know that sleep deprivation can increase our subjective experience of pain (1). Many of us have experienced sleep deprivation and noticed the profound effect it has on the mind and body: 50% of individuals with insomnia suffer from chronic pain (2). Benefits such as improved mood and wellbeing occur with a good sleep pattern, which can lead to better food choices and more positive interactions and emotional patterns during the daytime hours.

Also, exposing oneself to artificial light, TVs, computer screens and/or cell phones can create stimulation of the occipital cortex and further impair sleep. Studies show that blocking blue light from these devices may actually improve sleep (3). Allowing the brain to release melatonin and induce sleep is crucial for setting the nighttime pattern. In terms of hormone regulation, 75% of our growth hormone is released when we sleep, another added benefit. This very important hormone also plays a role in fat metabolism and regulating body composition and fluids. Having a set routine and maintaining this pattern can have tremendous effects.

We can encourage our patients to indulge in a bath with essential oils or epsom salts, perform a self massage, read a book, have light conversation with friends or family or even journal during the hour prior to bedtime. As this nightly pattern is developed, their sleep rhythm will improve and reset, allowing for a powerful effect on the nervous system.

### Suggested Goal

Suggest a 10 p.m. bedtime nightly and no technology use for one hour prior.



## Step 3: Create a Predictable Meal Pattern

In addition to establishing a nightly routine, having a predictable eating pattern greatly influences migraine pain. Many patients, due to their focus on work, children, caretaking and more skip meals or eat in an unpredictable fashion. This disorganized daily eating pattern leads to imbalanced eating patterns, cravings, unpredictable adrenal output and a higher risk of pain, weight and mood imbalances. In contrast, having a set pattern to meals allows the adrenal cortisol output to become established and reduces food cravings in addition to stress eating due to excessive hunger.

Based on recent studies, eating out of alignment with a diurnal clock increases risk of obesity and disease (4). We also know that obesity is linked to more frequency and severity of migraine (5). Based on our knowledge regarding weight gain and migraine, it's important to encourage our patients to establish an eating routine that allows their hypothalamic-adrenal-pituitary axis to be in alignment in order to reduce food cravings, weight gain and mood imbalances and worsen the migraine condition. Eating lunch as the biggest meal of the day can allow for the most nutrient absorption and replenishment of our systems' needs.

### Suggested Goal

Instruct patient to eat three set meals per day, with lunch being the most important and biggest meal of the day.

## Step 4: Spend Time Connecting to Self and Nature

People who struggle with migraine often choose to visit the physician when the migraine attacks become too difficult to manage at home. Stress is one of the most common activators for migraine. Stress interpretation varies from patient to patient, and each patient processes stress in a unique way. For some, a slight shift in barometric pressure may trigger an attack and for others, a menstrual cycle. These events should not be considered stressful by the mind, yet often are considered dangerous by the migraine brain. The migraine brain is so fine-tuned to change, that if any change occurs, internal or external, it easily triggers the stress response system, or the hypothalamic-pituitary axis (HPA axis). For this reason, patients would benefit from learning the tools to manage their own stress system and work towards creating a less reactive physiology. Studies have shown that cognitive behavioral therapy, relaxation therapy, supplements, biofeedback, yoga, massage and acupuncture have all had some benefit in migraine (6). Each of these approaches seem to have an effect on the stress response system. The more they are practiced or used, the more balanced and less reactive the system becomes.

For this lifestyle suggestion, it's helpful to ask patients which approach they prefer to reduce their stress response system. The simplest suggestion is connecting with nature by taking a 10-minute walk daily. Studies have shown the therapeutic effects of forest bathing on mind health (7). Emerging data also shows the potential link between green light therapy (i.e., surrounding oneself with a garden) and improvement in pain (8). What if you do not have nature in your surroundings? Bring it in by planting a few herbs in pots in your kitchen or even having some plants on your desk. Taking a break every hour and looking at a plant for 30 seconds can relax the brain, relax your eyes and quiet the mind. If this connection with

green and nature is accomplished, further modalities such as CBT, yoga, massage and/or supplements may be added to improve the HPA axis and create a more harmonious system. During this daily walk, patients are encouraged to reflect on the day and think about all the aspects of life they are grateful for.

### Suggested Goal

Encourage patients to take a 10-minute walk daily in nature or add some plants to their desk.

## Summary:

The key to educating patients on lifestyle approaches for the improvement of their migraine is to allow them the important understanding of connection with diurnal and nocturnal rhythms. By encouraging set bedtime routines and allowing the brain to naturally induce a state of sleep, along with maintaining diurnal rhythms such as set eating patterns, the HPA axis balances itself. This allows the nervous system to become less reactive to stressors and thus generate less migraine pain. In addition, a daily connection with nature allows the brain to harmonize its patterns, thus leading to a healthier and more quiescent brain. Once these principles are established, further lifestyle recommendations may be added based on the individual's goals and needs.

**In addition to these references, my opinions and thoughts are included in the writings above based on years of clinical practice.**

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