The Complementary Guide to Migraine Management

MIGRAINE ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND
What is Complementary/Alternative Medicine?

Complementary/Alternative Medicine can be described as “Diagnosis, treatment and/or prevention which complements mainstream medicine by contributing to a common whole, by satisfying a demand not met by orthodoxy, or by diversifying the conceptual frameworks of medicine,”

Professor Ernst. MD, PhD, FRCP.

Often conventional medicine and alternative or complementary therapies can work hand-in-hand in managing migraine. As well as the very successful medical treatments of migraine such as analgesics, triptans and preventative treatments, there exists a range of drug-free alternatives that can be highly effective for many sufferers. Complementary or Alternative Medicine (often referred to as CAM) should be considered as part of an overall approach to general well being. CAM practitioners take a holistic view of health (i.e. viewing the whole person, not just a particular part of them). Many alternative treatments are free from side effects and can be fitted into most lifestyles with minimal disruption. These management techniques can be used as part of a combined approach with medication or can sometimes be effective even when used on their own.

As migraine is a complex condition in both cause and management, it is important to have a correct diagnosis from a GP/headache specialist. There are many migraine sufferers who have experimented with various kinds of non-medical treatments in the hope of finding relief. This document is not an exhaustive comment on complementary treatments in Ireland but deals with those commonly practised by people with migraine, such as;

- Acupuncture
- Behavioural Therapies
- Biofeedback
- Mindfulness
- Nutritional Therapy
- Physiotherapy
- Reflexology
- Vitamins and Minerals
- Yoga
What is it?

This form of ancient Chinese medicine uses fine needles at precise points on twelve nerve or energy pathways in the body called meridians. Acupuncturists believe that chi (energy) is channelled along these meridians and when interrupted or blocked, pain or illness can occur.

By inserting these fine needle heads into the interrupted body parts, an acupuncturist is able to unblock and restore the flow of the energy and as a consequence, health is expected to improve. Acupuncture needles stimulate nerve endings under the skin, which send impulses to the brain. These impulses can then stimulate pain-easing endorphins. Research has found, through the use of brain scans, that acupuncture increases the blood flow to the thalamus, a part of the brain responsible for sending and receiving pain messages. In theory, virtually any complaint can be treated with acupuncture.

How is it relevant to migraine?

Acupuncture, in practice, is considered good for relieving pain in various areas of the body. It has proved successful in the treatment of migraine, especially migraine with aura. Some patients respond more quickly than others. It is usually thought that if there has been no improvement after approximately six treatments that the migraine is unlikely to respond to it.

We recommend that if you have an interest in acupuncture, then it is worthwhile to investigate it as a form of migraine treatment, but remember that for every individual the results will vary.

Approaching a practitioner

You can approach a practitioner through the Traditional Chinese Medicine Council of Ireland (also known as the Acupuncture Council of Ireland) which is the unification of three regulatory bodies:

- The Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Organisation (ACMO)
- The Acupuncture Foundation Professional Association (AFPA)
- The Association of Irish Acupuncturists (AIA)

Contact them at 061 276 532 or log onto www.acupuncturecouncilofireland.com
What is it?

Behaviour Therapies are therapies which use different and varying techniques to treat psychological problems such as stress, anxiety and depression. Approaches such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) have been shown to be effective treatments in coping with migraine. There is no one approach that is right for everybody, so find an approach that you enjoy and that contributes to your feelings of wellbeing.

Actively building strategies into each day is therapeutic as in this Rescue Plan which takes the acronym RESCUE as a useful reminder to:

R – Remain Calm
E – Escape from known triggers
S – Stay away from stress
C – Carry migraine medication at all times
U – Use relaxation exercises
E – Eat and sleep on schedule

How is it relevant to migraine?

People who live with migraine deal with feelings of fear, anger, frustration, helplessness, related to the impact that migraine has on their quality of life. They also experience low mood, worry and anxiety which can make all the other aspects of migraine more difficult to cope with. If you live with migraine you need to consider ways to manage stress, anxiety and depression.

Approaching a practitioner

You can go onto the website of the Irish Council for psychotherapy to find a local councillor who does CBT or other kinds of behavioural therapies.

Members of the Council can be contacted on 01 902 3819, or log onto www.psychotherapycouncil.ie
**What is it?**

Biofeedback is a form of complementary treatment that uses your mind to control your body. We all use biofeedback at one time or another. If you have ever taken your temperature or stepped on a scale, then you have used biofeedback. Both activities give you ‘feedback’ on your body’s condition. Biofeedback is often regarded as mainstream medicine. It can help people with problems such as migraine/headache, stress-related illnesses, high blood pressure and many more.

**How is it relevant to migraine?**

The mind can play an important role in treating migraine, headaches and other types of chronic pain. Often though, our minds are not primed to help our bodies relax but are filled with tension and stress. Biofeedback helps us to recognise and control such states.

Usually, tension headaches are caused by muscles in the neck, shoulders, jaws and other facial structures being tense for long periods of time, for example due to stress or bad posture. Psychophysiological assessments can recognise if the muscles are functioning incorrectly and why. Biofeedback of muscle tension in particular is used to teach people to recognise levels of tension and to correct them.

Biofeedback has been shown to be an effective prophylactic treatment when conducted by appropriately trained professionals, with a number of studies showing biofeedback to be more effective than headache monitoring alone.

Temperature biofeedback for migraine headaches works, theoretically, in a similar way. Here the measurement often used is Hand Skin Temperature (HST). The rationale is that the higher the HST, the greater the level of relaxation and vice-versa. Biofeedback specialists claim that people with migraine generally suffer from poor circulation and poor recovery from vasoconstriction. A rise in HST indicates that the individual has successfully, and under his or her own control, dilated their blood vessels. The benefits of this control are that once you have learned to pinpoint your own stressors, you may have the ability to control the onset of an attack. Your eventual goal will be to produce these responses on your own, outside the therapist’s office and without the help of technology.

**Approaching a practitioner**

Log onto www.biofeedback.ie for more information. To check the qualifications of a practitioner log onto www.bcia.org
Physiotherapy is defined by the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) as "providing services to individuals and populations to develop, maintain and restore maximum movement and functional ability throughout the lifespan". Chartered Physiotherapists use mainly physical means such as exercise, manipulation, mobilisation, massage and electrotherapy to help patients achieve their full potential.

Neck pain is commonly associated with migraine and many experts in migraine believe that this neck pain is merely an extension of the migraine headache, and that the only way to successfully treat the neck pain is to treat the migraine. Many people who get a lot of neck pain with their migraine will not improve with physiotherapy. However, there are also a number of people living with migraine whose neck muscles or joints are acting as a headache trigger and physiotherapy treatment should be part of their multidisciplinary care. The most common treatments used by physiotherapists in the management of neck pain are hands-on techniques (manual therapy) and exercise.

If you do not see some improvement in headache symptoms after three sessions of appropriate physiotherapy treatment, it is unlikely to help your symptoms. If physiotherapy has successfully identified your neck as one of your migraine triggers, and a combination of hands-on treatment and exercise is helping, then ensure that you speak to your physiotherapist about teaching you how to self-manage your neck pain.

Vestibular rehabilitation therapy (VRT) can be very beneficial for people with a vestibular migraine diagnosis. VRT is a systematic exercise based programme of tailored exercises to help desensitise the system or promote re-calibration of the system. The exercises can also help people with migraine-associated vertigo.

First step is to get assessed by a qualified physiotherapist with training in headache management. Visit the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists website at www.iscp.ie
What is it?

Mindfulness is a practice which allows us to observe our thoughts and sensations in the here and now. It teaches us to stay in the present moment and allow our worrying thoughts and body sensations to move in and out of our awareness.

Mindfulness is not about trying to relax, but more about learning how to accept things as they are. Mindfulness is promoted in general hospital settings around the world for people who are experiencing distress due to physical or psychological problems.

Relaxation is not just about having a holiday or taking a break from our normal routine, although both of those things can lift our mood. Teaching ourselves to relax means learning ways to reduce our physical tension levels and the emotional worry that goes with being stressed. Our bodies are built to go through periods of tension and relaxation naturally, and developing a relaxation practice reminds us how to trigger this natural relaxation response.

Relaxation practice can be as simple as learning how to do relaxation breathing (sometimes called abdominal breathing) and practicing it regularly. We can also use tools such as imagery, when we actively imagine calming scenes, or progressive muscle relaxation, when we work at tensing and relaxing all of our muscle groups. The important thing is learning how to reduce tension.

If we are very stressed, a daily practice is recommended. In order to achieve a full relaxation response, our relaxation exercises should last between 15 to 20 minutes. The more we practice, the easier it becomes to reduce our levels of tension.

How is it relevant to migraine?

Research shows that people who have a regular relaxation practice reduce their physical experience of stress and tension significantly. This is associated with better health outcomes and a better quality of life. Stress and anxiety are consistently listed by people with migraine in their list of triggers. Also, the fear of the next attack as well as the impact of severe attacks on persons wellbeing, can lead to social anxiety and depression. Finding ways to manage stress and alleviate anxiety can therefore be beneficial to people living with migraine.

Where can I find more information?

A good resource to get started with is the Mindfulness and Relaxation webpage of Beaumont Hospital: www.beaumont.ie/marc
What is it?

Nutritional Therapy is a natural therapy that strives to work harmoniously with the body’s healing powers to resolve health conditions. It uses the latest scientific research to determine how diet and lifestyle change can reduce symptoms and improve health.

Nutritional therapy can treat a wide variety of ailments, including migraine. It involves the use of food and food supplements to cure and prevent disease and illness. The focus here is placed on treating the source of the patient’s illness rather than treating the symptoms, which practitioners believe mask over the underlying problems and eventually the condition will worsen. Eating a balanced diet is fundamental to the promotion of good health and so advice on diet is usually incorporated in most treatments and therapies – of both an orthodox and alternative nature.

However, nutritional therapists often take a more radical approach to diet, advising individuals to introduce completely new foods and to reduce or exclude foods that were previously a major part of their diet in a process called ‘eliminate and challenge’. Food intolerances, allergies and long-term toxic reactions to certain foods are identified and treated. Food supplements may also be prescribed to correct any mineral and vitamin imbalances detected. Nutritional therapists usually also stress the value of eating fresh, organic food and drinking natural spring water.

However, most headache neurologists will advise against cutting large food groups from the diet. Use of the headache diary can help to identify if there are any obvious dietary triggers. In studies on trigger factors, diet is generally only cited in about 20% of cases. Remember, when you eat is often more important than what you eat – so try not to miss or delay meals, and stay hydrated.

Diet Advice

Remember to eat little and often, and avoid long periods without food, especially if you are stressed or tense.

Approaching a practitioner

To locate a registered nutritional therapist in your area log onto Ireland’s official Nutritional Therapists of Ireland website at www.ntoi.ie
What is it?

The most important feature of reflexology is that it reduces stress. The aim is to allow the body to undergo deep relaxation and as a result tension is released in the muscles. The body then releases endorphins, which are the natural relaxants.

The underlying theory of reflexology is that there are reflex points in the hands and feet that correspond to the glands, organs and other parts of the body. Pressuring specific areas on the feet or hands with the thumbs and fingers allows reflexologists to alleviate or treat a range of conditions. Each reflex point reflects the state of the body part or organ by its feel and condition and practitioners can sometimes detect weaknesses before they start to cause problems. Most practising reflexologists prefer to work with feet, as they are larger and more sensitive than hands.

How is it relevant to migraine?

Reflexology is not a substitute for medical care and reflexologists do not diagnose conditions. As a complementary therapy, it is deemed a valuable treatment for migraine, high blood pressure, back and neck pain, menstrual problems, irritable bowel syndrome and other stress related ailments. When reflexology is used to treat somebody with migraine, it is not necessarily just the head that is treated. Every part of the body is seen to but particular attention is paid to the area that is sympathetic for the client.

Dehydration has also been a big factor for people with migraine in that they may drink a lot of tea or coffee and are less inclined to replenish themselves by drinking ordinary water. It is important after a reflexology treatment to keep hydrated by drinking lots of water.

One particular study (Lafuente et al.) found foot reflexology to be as helpful to patients with headaches as medication (flunarizine), yet foot reflexology produced less side-effects than medication. However, clinical trials on a large-scale are in short supply and so reflexology should be treated as a therapy that can produce positive psychological effects.

Approaching a practitioner

The Irish Reflexologists Institute
Tel: 085 215 3475 or
E-mail administrator@reflexology.ie
or log onto www.reflexology.ie
What is it?
The intake of vitamins, minerals, oils and herbs may not be seen as a complementary therapy as it is something that we can take control of in our everyday lives without help from an outside practitioner. However, these dietary groups can have an affect on specific medical conditions.

How is it relevant to migraine?
Vitamin B2, or riboflavin, is said to help prevent migraine. It is thought that the vitamin increases the energy potential of mitochondria (the cells’ main source of energy). Studies have shown that migraineurs’ brains have reduced energy reserves between attacks.

Vitamin B3 (which can be taken in the form of niacin) is also said to act as a vasodilator. A vasodilator is a drug or chemical which relaxes the smooth muscle in blood vessels and causes them to dilate. This can provide relief to migraineurs.

Magnesium is needed for more than 300 of the body’s biochemical reactions. Several small-scale studies have evaluated the effectiveness of magnesium for migraine and have had promising results. High doses of magnesium may cause diarrhoea, nausea, loss of appetite, muscle weakness, difficulty breathing, low blood pressure, irregular heart rate and confusion. It can interact with certain medications – such as calcium channel blockers (often used for migraine).

Ginger can be effective for migraine due to its anti-inflammatory and anti-nausea properties. Ginger can be used in its natural form, as a tea or in capsule forms.

Coenzyme Q10 is involved in the creation of the important substance in the body known as adenosine triphosphate (ATP). ATP serves as the cell’s major energy source and drives a number of biological processes including muscle contraction and the production of protein. Many foods contain CoQ10 but studies have shown that some people with migraine may benefit from supplementation. Although relatively safe, CoQ10 can interact with other drugs such as cholesterol-lowering drugs. It is therefore important to discuss any supplements with your doctor.

Approaching a Practitioner
A dietician/nutritionist may be best placed to advise a migraineur regarding their use of vitamins, minerals and oils.
Check the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute (INDI) at: www.indi.ie
Tel: 01 2804839 Email: info@indi.ie
What is it?

Yoga itself is a therapy by nature because it focuses on the holistic well-being of the individual. Yoga looks at the benefits of stress management through breathing and relaxation techniques. It also looks at increasing flexibility and bringing greater balance into the body and the systems of the body, primarily the nervous system.

How is it relevant to migraine?

Breathing exercises in yoga are used to help calm the nervous system and the day-to-day activities which can produce stress-related symptoms in our lives. Therefore yoga may be appropriate as stress can be a major trigger of migraine. Most migraines and headaches are based on constriction and dilation, creating an imbalance or overflow of blood up into the head area. In relaxation practices, the yoga practitioners are hoping to release the tension of the body.

A 2007 trial in India investigated the effectiveness of holistically approached yoga therapy for migraine treatment compared to self-care. This randomised controlled trial, showed a significant reduction in migraine headache frequency and associated clinical features in patients treated with yoga over a period of 3 months. However, more research is needed.

• Stress is recognised as one of the most common triggers of headaches and migraines. It may be unavoidable but how it is managed may reduce the frequency or severity of attacks. Yoga stretches, a focus on breathing, meditation and relaxation all help in the management of stress.
• Poor posture produces chronic muscular tension, especially in the upper back, shoulders and neck. This tension often contributes to headaches or migraines. Regular practice of yoga can help to relieve tension.

Approaching a Yoga Therapy Practitioner

Contact Yoga Therapy Ireland at 01 235 2120
Email: yti@eircom.net or log onto www.yogatherapyireland.com

• Because there are so many practices to choose from, yoga can be practised by anyone regardless of age or fitness levels.
The MAI would like to stress that this document serves as an information booklet only. We would also advise that you check the authenticity of the qualifications of any practitioner you choose to attend. Medical advice should always be obtained on any specific matter. **Some complementary treatments are contraindicated with certain illnesses and medications, for more information consult your GP or specialist.**

**Other Resources**

**Alexander Technique**
Irish Society of Alexander Technique Teachers, Ireland
www.isatt.ie

**Bio-Energy Therapy**
Bio-Energy Therapist Association of Ireland Teachers, Ireland
www.bio-energy.ie

**Bowen Technique**
Bowen Therapists Ireland
www.bowenireland.com

**Buteyko**
Buteyko Association of Ireland
www.buteyko.ie

**Chiropractic**
Chiropractic Association of Ireland
www.chiropractic.ie

**Herbal Medicine**
Irish Institute of Medical Herbalists
www.iimh.org

**Homeopathy**
Irish School of Homeopathy
www.ish.ie

**Kinesiology**
The Kinesiology Association of Ireland
www.kai.ie

**Osteopathy**
Irish Osteopathic Association
list of practitioners at
www.osteopathy.ie

**Reiki**
Reiki Association of Ireland
www.reikifederationireland.com

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**CALL-SAVE HELPLINE**
1850 200 378 (ROI)
0844 826 9323 (NI)
(10.00 – 4.00, Monday to Friday)

**Specialist Nurse**
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Port Tunnel Business Park,
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www.migraine.ie