

Migraines and the Weather

"Weather triggers my migraines," I patiently repeated, to what seemed like the millionth doctor in a long line of doctors. "Weather. Not alcohol, I don't drink. Not chocolate, I eat it all the time! I'm telling you, I know when a storm front is two days out. I know when it's snowing in Denver."

The doctor looked at me with something resembling interest for the first time.

"I've heard of that," he said, shocking me to my bones. "Changes in barometric pressure, eh? We might be able to do something about that."

*Well, he was the only doctor I'd ever met who said **that**, I thought. Things suddenly looked brighter. No, he hadn't said for sure that he could fix me, but hey, he didn't look at me like I was crazy, either...*

~(Anonymous Migraine Patient)

Many migraine sufferers have attempted for years to tell doctors that they don't seem to have any of the triggers on the migraine list; rather, their vicious headaches seemed linked to weather patterns. This usually leads to skepticism, if not outright disbelief and dismissal of migraine claims.

The frequently asked question is "OK, what kind of weather supposedly triggers these migraines of yours?"

Problem with that question is, they don't like the answer: "Well, different kinds, really..."

It's not the weather, precisely, you see. It's the *change* in the weather. When it's hot, but the wind picks up and the sky turns a funny color. When it's cold and clear and still as can be, but the weekend forecast calls for snow. When it's so humid you can hardly breathe, and the thunder keeps rumbling but the rain just won't start.

Some people get headaches when it's too hot or too cold, if it's storming, if the sun is bright, if the wind blows too hard. Most, however, get migraines when the weather *shifts* from one extreme to the other, whether the change be in temperature, humidity levels or barometric pressure.

A 2000 study at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada tracked 75 migraine patients for two years.(*1) A specific weather pattern known as the Chinook is particular to the region; warm westerly winds flowing into the area from late fall to early spring can cause extreme changes in temperature and barometric pressure. There is a recorded instance of a temperature shift greater than 100 degrees F in a single day, and winds of over 100 miles per hour have also been documented.(*2)

The migraine patients, aged 16 to 65, were asked to keep a detailed log of the dates that they suffered migraines, the time the headaches started and ended, and the severity of the pain. The volunteers were not told that the study was related to weather conditions. A team of neurologists studied these records and matched the dates in the logs with weather records for the area that showed when the Chinook had been blowing.

32 of the 75 patients suffered migraines immediately preceding or during Chinooks. This is a very high percentage for a condition most physicians until then had brushed aside as being 'all in the patient's head'. Doctors finally started taking patients seriously.

Most migraines that respond to medication can actually be averted if the dosage is taken at the first warning signal that a migraine is about to occur. There is hope that sufferers from weather related migraines can stave off an attack simply by monitoring the weather reports and taking medication when the conditions are preparing to undergo drastic change.

So far several other studies have been done that seem to confirm the Canadian university's results. Several other medical establishments, the Mayo Clinic among them, ran their own study and said the results were inconclusive.(*3)

Many migraine sufferers are now having their symptoms acknowledged and treated, however, and can take steps to prevent or lessen the effects of weather triggered migraines. Medication is one possibility, with propranolol being the most popular preventive medication for weather related migraines. Other avenues include relaxation techniques, massage, aromatherapy or even acupuncture or acupressure therapy.

If you believe your migraine symptoms are weather related, start keeping a log of your migraine attacks. Chart as much as you can as often as you can; if your headaches turn out to *not* be triggered by weather changes, you might uncover another reason from data you collect, if you include diet, sleeping patterns and stress levels as well.

Educate yourself by looking up various case studies and researching the different medications and techniques available to prevent and treat migraines. You know your own body better than anyone else; try to make it as healthy as possible and figure out ways to cut down on stress in your life. Any migraine, whether the trigger be weather, food or hormone related, can be exacerbated by stress.

If you determine that your headaches are indeed set off by weather patterns, take your logbook in with you to your doctor's appointment. This will help you make your case if your doctor is a skeptic. Together you and your physician should be able to come up with a plan to reduce your chances of getting migraines and minimize the severity of any headaches you do suffer. Hopefully, just being validated in your suspicions about your migraines being linked to weather will be a comfort; knowing your enemy is half the battle won!

(*1) BBC News Online: Health -- Wed, 26 Jan, 2000

(*2) Wikipedia, from the Encyclopædia Britannica (2006)

(*3) Mayo Clinic Staff, 2008, Dan Vergano, Medical Tribune News Service

"Research provided by Grace Alexander"

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