

The Estrogen Connection—

Predisposed Women Managing Painful Migraine Headaches

BY DOTIE EVANS

For those who suffer from the recurring, throbbing, extremely painful headaches known as migraines, nothing is more important than finding relief.

"While you are in the throes of a full-blown migraine, normal life stops. You are totally unable to function, and I know this from personal experience," said Dr Diane Wirz.

Dr Wirz spoke at a Danbury Hospital Medical Town Meeting on March 22 on the topic "Hormone Fluctuations Add to Women's Predisposition to Migraine Headaches."

She explained that migraines, caused by a biological disorder of the brain, strike 18 percent of all women as opposed to six percent of all men. Also, the majority of migraine sufferers of both sexes have not seen a doctor about their condition.

"They are undiagnosed. They think there is nothing to do but go to bed and wait for it to go away. I want to dispel that notion," Dr Wirz said.

"The best approach is to treat the migraine before it happens."

Interviewed on March 30 by *The Bee* at her office at Associated Neurologists in Danbury, Dr Wirz discussed women's predisposition to migraines associated with the onset of menstruation, the use of oral contraceptives, pregnancy, menopause, premenstrual syndrome, and hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

"Migraines go up when girls start getting their periods," Dr Wirz said.

Doctors diagnose headaches as migraines when a patient has had several recurrent episodes during a three-month period of time, and has a normal neurological exam. "We assume it's a migraine unless proven otherwise," she added.

"Many patients say their migraine will abate with sleep. Many have a family history of the problem, having had motion sickness, or episodic vertigo as children. Many also don't like strong smells like perfumes or chemical cleaners."

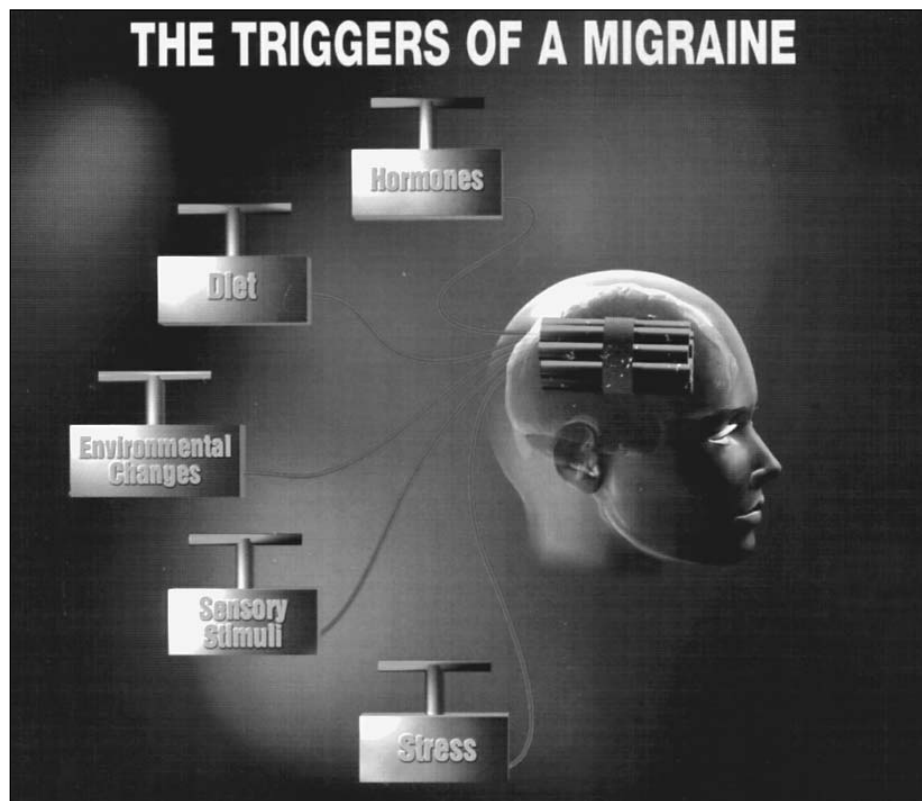
Dr Diane Wirz has been practicing with Associated Neurologists for the past 20 years. Her undergraduate education was at Russell Sage College in Albany, N.Y., where she majored in nursing. She took her medical training at Albany Medical College, and spent three years in internal medicine at Danbury Hospital. She received her neurology training at the University of Connecticut in Farmington.

Diet And Medical Interventions

After seeing a doctor, patients may find relief by taking medications, including triptans, that are available today to treat migraines. The drugs may come in pill, injection, or nasal spray form, and they are effective because they are migraine specific.

"The goal is to be pain-free in two hours with no recurrence," said Dr Wirz.

She does not recommend taking analgesics or painkillers, since they do not address the inflammation response that causes migraines. During an attack, people with migraine may have a more sensitive nervous system response than others do. Changes in brain activity may cause blood vessels and nerves around the brain to become inflamed. Diagnosing a



Some people are born with a biochemical makeup that makes them more prone to migraine headaches. This inherited tendency is like a stick of dynamite in the brain, and the triggers — hormones, diet, environmental changes, sensory stimuli, and stress — act as detonators.

—Associated Neurologists patient education

migraine can be tricky, since some patients are nauseous while others are not. Some have their eyes affected, while others don't.

"Patients worry if recurring headaches can signal something more serious, like a brain tumor. For this reason, we run tests to rule this out," she said.

"Physical therapy helps in treating migraines. Even a massage of the neck muscles can break the cycle before a full-blown migraine sets in. Then there are daily medications that can cut down on the frequency and severity of headaches.

"Some of the antidepressants or medications for seizures and epilepsy work. Some people say they feel better after drinking a coke with caffeine, or a cup of strong coffee. Yet, caffeine is considered one of the triggers for migraine.

"Coffee or caffeinated drinks are a double-edged sword. They are like analgesics, which also have caffeine. They help the medications work better, but you must limit consumption or you will go into withdrawal. Some doctors advise no more than one to two cups a day," said Dr Wirz.

She also mentioned Aspartame, a sweetener that is added to sodas, as being another migraine trigger.

"Although people are born with a tendency to migraines, I try to get them to isolate their triggers. Weather can contribute, as in a drop in atmospheric pressure. Other triggers are perfumes, stress, and normal hormonal fluctuations. Just before menstruation, the estrogen level drops. This, too, may trigger a migraine."

Dr Wirz tells all of her patients, "Food and diet are tremendously important, so try to eat healthy. I've had people come in who are on the South Beach diet and they tell me their headaches are a lot better."

She frequently offers her favorite, off-color acronym to help people remember what foods to avoid: "Cut out the CRAP — Caffeine, Refined sugar, Alcohol, and Processed food."

Three Migraines Stories

Technically, a migraine is a neurovascular headache, meaning it involves both the nerves and the blood vessels in the brain. In reality, the experience of suffering from migraines varies with each individual. The following interviews were held with three women whose migraine histories are somewhat similar, yet different.

Sarah, 33, believes she got her first migraine in her early 20s while on a trip to Europe.

"It might have been triggered by lack of sleep and not eating regular meals or decent food," Sarah said.

Although Sarah does not experience a visual cue, known as an aura, she does notice that before the onset of a migraine her sense of smell suddenly becomes very acute.

"Things will irritate me that didn't before — like the smell of coffee or cigarettes. But then, sometimes I'll just get one with no warning at all. When I do, it feels like little men are inside my head with anvils pounding from the inside, and I am very nauseous and sensitive to light.

"Usually I just go lie down in a very dark place and try and sleep it off. Drinking anything makes me sick if it is a very bad attack, but if it isn't too bad I can have a coke, and sometimes that helps me from feeling like I'm going to be sick."

Laurie, 49, did not experience migraines until she was in her early 30s after her second pregnancy but third child (she has fraternal twins and one other child).

"Before that, I had been on the birth



Diane Wirz, MD, is with the Danbury Hospital Department of Medicine. Dr Wirz has maintained a 20-year practice at Associated Neurologists, 69 Sand Pit Road, Danbury. She discusses the reasons why women get migraines more often than men, and how to diagnose and treat the problem.

— Bee Photo, Evans

control pill and didn't experience them. There was no aura and no warning, I would just wake up with it. At first, I didn't realize what it was. I had to stay in bed in a dark room. Any noise would cause a bright flash. It was like my brain suddenly didn't know the difference between light and sound," Laurie said.

They grew worse in her 40s when she took on a full-time, first-time teaching assignment while she was trying to raise her three children, clearly a stressful period in her life.

"I do know that after my hysterectomy at 45 when I began to take estrogen, the migraines weren't as bad," Laurie added.

Charlotte, 58, believes her migraines are mainly stress-related, though there may be a hormonal component because she began having them when she was premenstrual at age 9 or 10.

"Imagine the worst possible hangover you've ever had, then double it. There is intense, excruciating pain in the left frontal part of my brain. Like if I moved, I would throw up. Years ago, there really wasn't much I could take for them other than codeine, and that didn't help if I was into the cycle as I'd just throw it up again."

Today, Charlotte takes Imitrex for the migraines, and she tries to manage her life to avoid undue stress. On the positive side, both Laurie and Charlotte noted that with age their migraines seem to be tapering off.

"As I've gotten older, the intensity has lessened," said Laurie.

There has to be something good about getting old, she concluded.

For more information about migraine headaches, visit www.associatedneurologists.com or call Dr Diane Wirz, Associated Neurologists, PC, 69 Sand Pit Road, Danbury, at 748-2551.