
Management of headaches while fasting

Many people who fast for religious purposes suffer mild or moderate headaches as a result of factors such as caffeine withdrawal, stress and low blood sugar. The good news, says Dr Elliot Shevel the chairman of the South African Headache Society is that you can often manage these headaches without breaking your fast.

“Headache onset often occurs in the afternoon or evening just before the fast is broken. Headache frequency typically increases over the duration of fasting. Those prone to headaches at other times of the year are most likely to get headache when fasting, but some patients that experience headaches during this time have no previous history of headaches or migraines.”

How to eliminate headache from your fasting regimen:

Caffeine withdrawal

Dr Shevel highlights caffeine withdrawal as a common cause of headache while fasting. Patients can often prevent headaches by reducing caffeine consumption in the weeks leading up to their fast, while a cup of strong coffee just before the start of the fast may prevent caffeine withdrawal headache.

Low blood sugar

Hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) can also trigger headaches in many people. If a meal with high sugar content is taken before the fast begins, it can cause a rapid rise in blood sugar levels followed by a fast drop that may trigger a headache. Eating a meal with low sugar content before the fast may prevent the onset of a headache during the day. Contact The Headache Clinic for a list of suitable foods (foods with a low glycemic index).

Dehydration

Dehydration is another common trigger, so adequate intake of fluid before the onset of the fast can often prevent headaches. The human brain consists mostly of water, and it is very sensitive to the amount of water available to it. When the brain detects that the water supply is too low, it begins to produce histamines. This is essentially a process of water rationing and conservation, in order to safeguard the brain in case the water shortage continues for a long period of time. The histamines directly cause pain and fatigue, in other words a headache and the low energy that usually accompanies it. Make sure to drink large amounts of water before starting your fast and ending it.

Other headache triggers

“Patients should also, as far as possible, try to avoid exposure to other triggers such as stress, fatigue and lack of sleep during their fast, when there is a greater tendency to experience headache,” says Dr Shevel. “Rest and sleep often help prevent being subjected to headaches and the pain often melts away when the fast is broken.”

Medication

During Ramadan, preventive medication that will last for the full twelve hours of the fast include preparations such as Naproxen sodium. This is taken as a single dose of two tablets just before the fast begins. These tablets are sold over-the-counter at your pharmacy as “Aleve” formulated by Bayers AG. The manufacturer has confirmed that they are Halaal.

When to call your doctor

“If headaches are interfering with your fast, contact The Headache Clinic on 0861 678 911 as we have a number of techniques to relieve you of your pain so that you can continue your fast without having your focus on the fast overtaken by persistent headaches”, added Dr Shevel. If headaches persist after the fast or are severe in nature, patients are advised to seek help from a medical professional. Dr Shevel explains that headaches can be most successfully treated using a multidisciplinary approach, since no one medical specialization covers all the psychological and physical dimensions of severe headaches.

For more information or to set up an interview with Dr Shevel please contact Kayleen Naidoo on +2711 484 0933 or kayleen@headacheclinic.co.za