Migraine Trigger Guide:

Odor

Explanation

Odor or smell sensitivity has not been extensively researched in migraine. We do know that up to 50% of those with migraine experience a change in their sense of smell during a migraine attack. It can also occur frequently and trigger attacks in those susceptible.

In some, the change may be a small increase in the ability to smell things from further away. More often, patients complain that some smells make them feel worse during an attack.

Migraine has been described as a neurological malfunction which can affect the way we interpret or misinterpret inputs from our senses such as smell.

Trigger causes

Research in 2007 from 1,000 participants found approximately 40% of patients experienced sensitivity to smells during a migraine attack.

They reported the most disturbing odors were:

- Perfumes or colognes
- Food
- Cigarette smoke

Other problematic odors may include:

- Room fresheners
- Fumes from cleaning products
- Wet paint
- Chemical, burnt plastic smells

How smell or odor can affect those migraine patients:

- Heightened sensitivity to smell
- Odor avoidance
- May trigger a migraine attack
May trigger nausea
Smells can lead to increased nausea
Changes in taste and/or smell

How do you know if this is an issue?
If certain scents trigger attacks or increase discomfort during an attack.

Options to try

Avoid:

- If the metro or subway smells and fumes are a problem then stay above ground and catch the bus, drive, ride or walk to work.
- If people continually wear certain perfumes despite requests not to, then avoid them.
- If this is happening in the workplace: employers should be willing to enact and enforce an office policy to prevent this problem in the workplace.
- Ask others to avoid wearing or using them around you.
- Be gentle, kind, and complimentary. Scents are very personal and people can get offended when they feel like you don't like the way they smell. Be sure to say scents, not odors (which may imply the smell is offensive) – even if you find perfume repulsive. Aunt Jane has chosen carefully the perfume she wears and thinks she smells wonderful.
- Make sure people know that this isn't a personal preference, but a health issue and that you won't be able to spend time with them if they wear scents. You may have to explain that scents, even nice ones like perfume and scented lotions, can trigger a migraine. If they are resistant or want to learn more, share this article with them: “Fragrance Can Be Dangerous for Migraine Patients” by Ellen Schnakenberg on the Migraine.com website.
- Keep some defenses close by
  - Aromatherapy – while this seems initially counter intuitive for the scent sensitive, some have reported benefits of aromatherapy with the right scents.
  - Even though aromatherapy doesn't stop migraine attacks, it can offer symptomatic relief and comfort.
  - One tactic is to keep a bottle of peppermint-smelling salts around (the scent will depend on personal preference). If perfume and other odors can be migraine triggers then getting the peppermint smelling salts to the nose quickly enough and not staying around the triggering odor long, it is possible to sometimes avoid a migraine.

- Accepting some odors
Some sources of odor are unavoidable. You can't prevent the smell of a bushfire nearby, or the car fumes when an old car drives past. In such cases, the best way to cope with a trigger is to accept things as they are and work as best you can around them. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, it's easier than railing against a situation you can't change.

Watch-outs

Osmophobia – a word used to describe the sensitivity to smell that often accompanies migraine attacks. In its strict definition, osmophobia means a fear or aversion to odors.

There can be an element of phobia with those who have strong aversions to certain smells such as wet paint. These triggers may not immediately bring on a migraine, but can also send you into a panic as you desperately try to get away from them.

More reasons to manage this trigger

Scents can be powerful. They have the ability to arouse memories, affect our moods, even relax the body, and reduce stress. The right scents can also be a useful tool in your broader health and wellbeing.¹