

Fast ways to cure a headache

Ramadaan, the Muslim month of fasting, starts this week and requires abstinence from eating, drinking and smoking from dawn to sunset for 29 to 30 days.

Many people who fast over Ramadaan 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, chairperson of the South African Headache Society, is that you can 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 suffer headaches, but some patients who experience headaches during this time have no history of headaches or migraines."

How to eliminate headaches during fasting

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

Hypoglycaemia (low blood sugar) can also trigger headaches. If a meal with a high sugar content is taken before the day's 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 a low sugar content before the fast may prevent the onset of a headache during the day.

Dehydration is another common trigger and adequate intake of fluid before the onset of the fast can often prevent headaches. The human brain is more than 75 percent water and 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 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 in the morning and after ending it in the evening.

"Patients should also, as far as possible, try to avoid exposure to other triggers such as fluid retention, stress, fatigue and lack of sleep during Ramadaan, when there is a greater tendency to experience headache." says Shevel. "Rest and sleep often help in preventing headaches and the pain often melts away when the fast is broken for the day."

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