

Holiday Foods that Can Cause Headaches

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The holidays are right around the corner, which means family and friends will be cooking and baking traditional recipes all month long. These recipes are often the focal point of celebration, but they can also cause drowsiness, headaches and even cluster headaches. AZFoothills.com spoke with the senior medical director for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona, Floyd Shewmake, M.D., to get a better understanding as to why the foods we love are causing us pain. Before you take a second bite of that scrumptious honey-baked ham or triple-chocolate cake, check out what Dr. Shewmake has to say about them.



AFM: What is the difference between a cluster headache and a regular headache or migraine?

DFS: Cluster headaches are unique in that they occur a few times per year, in clusters. The duration of the headache generally ranges from 30 to 90 minutes, and they can be very painful. Cluster headaches may come and go for months at a time, and then disappear for just as long.

AFM: What types of holiday foods could give people regular headaches or even trigger a migraine?

DFS: Foods that trigger migraine headaches are those high in nitrates, which include processed meats such as bacon, sausage and salami. Regular headaches can also be brought on by aged cheeses, alcohol and even chocolate. Aged cheeses include brie, blue cheese, gouda, parmesan and cheddar.

AFM: How can someone avoid headaches during the holiday season?

DFS: Stress is the most frequent cause of headaches at any time. However, if you think your headaches might be food-related, start keeping a food diary. That will allow you to easily track what you've eaten and how that relates to your headache pattern. Once you've identified food sensitivities, you can avoid whatever triggers episodes. Alcohol and lack of sleep are other frequent triggers for headaches. These triggers can become more prevalent during the holiday season, so an important avoidance method is taking care of yourself. Don't overbook your schedule, and look for ways to minimize stress.

AFM: Is there any special secret/remedy to cure a headache? Or do you have to ride it out until it passes?

DFS: In this case, prevention is the best medicine. Especially if you know you're prone to headaches, avoid trigger foods and stressful situations. Once you have a headache, over-the-counter medications will work for most people. However, if the headaches are particularly severe, frequent, or long-lasting you should bring them to the attention of your family doctor since prescription medication and some testing may be necessary.

AFM: If someone gets headaches quite frequently, should they consult their doctor?

DFS: Frequent headaches should always be brought to your doctor's attention.