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Today Show contributor Dr. Roshini Raj talks about what triggers headaches in our daily lives and how to prevent them.

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Transcript

Never Get Another Headache

TAMRON HALL reporting:

What if you could never get a headache again? Well, that may be a little too good to be true, but with 73 percent of Americans suffering from headaches, there are triggers you can avoid. Here to run down the list is TODAY contributor Dr. Roshini Raj, medical editor for Health magazine.

Dr. Raj, good morning. Good to see you.

Dr. ROSHINI RAJ (Assistant Professor of Medicine, NYU Langone Medical Center): Good morning, Tamron.

HALL: So most of us get a headache from time to time...

RAJ: Sure.

HALL: ...but there are things that we can narrow down or maybe even avoid, as you point out.

RAJ: Yeah, absolutely. So headaches are very common and sometimes they're this severe migraine form...

HALL: Mm-hmm.

RAJ: ...but often they're things we're doing in our daily lives that are actually triggering headaches. So if you know about them, you could do something about it.

HALL: Let's get to the list. The first one was a big surprise: Weight.

RAJ: Sure. So recent research shows that being overweight and certainly being obese increases your risk of getting headaches. So we can just add this to the list of the bad health effects of being over-weight. And...

HALL: Do we know specifically why?

RAJ: We're not really sure why, but it has been shown that losing weight can actually help with headaches.

HALL: Mm-hmm.

RAJ: So if you're very overweight, you're experiencing very frequent headaches, it's time to really look at your weight.

HALL: Also, you can look at your personality. How does your personality trigger a headache?
RAJ: Sure. And this is not so easy to change but...
HALL: Yeah.
RAJ: ...you know, there is the typical sort of type-A, very stressed-out personality. And many head-aches are caused by stress. So if you're feeling particularly under the gun ad having a lot of head-aches, it's time to do something about it. Meditation, yoga, even having some counseling could really help with your headaches.
HALL: Just find a way to decompress, take yourself out of the moment sometimes.
RAJ: Exactly.
HALL: Also, skipped meals. You hear that a lot, people say, `Oh, gosh, I didn't get anything to eat today, my head is killing me.'
RAJ: Right. So this is a hunger headache, which a lot of us experience. We're very busy, we end up skipping meals, but it's really important to not do that. And have some healthy snacks around...
HALL: Mm-hmm.
RAJ: ...so that you maintain an even level of blood sugar so that you don't get a headache.
HALL: Is there something in particular that would work fast?
RAJ: Well, almonds are great.
HALL: Mm-hmm.
RAJ: You know, fruits, vegetables. You want to avoid the very high sugary sweet foods because that'll give you a rush, but then a crash and you could get a worse headache after that.
HALL: And some people get a headache in the morning, or at least they believe, because they didn't have their caffeine boost of coffee, but you say drinking too much caffeine can cause headaches.
RAJ: Yeah, caffeine is really interesting. Caffeine is actually one of the ingredients in many mi-graine medicines, so it can help with certain types of headaches.
HALL: Mm-hmm.
RAJ: But if you're a frequent caffeine drinker, you can actually get a caffeine headache, you actu-ally get sort of a rebound.
HALL: Ah.
RAJ: As soon as you get a little bit of withdrawal, you get that headache. So the key here is to cut down on caffeine but do it gradually, you really need to taper it very slowly.
HALL: Another one on your list that really surprised me, dehy-dration. How does that cause head-aches?
RAJ: Yeah. So when you're dehydrated, you're not getting enough blood flowing through your veins and to your brain, that can cause a headache. So you want to make sure you're well hydrated. This doesn't necessarily mean you have to drink a lot of water...
HALL: Right.
RAJ: ...but fluids and even fruits and vegetables, many of them have a lot of water in them. Espe-cially if you're exercising or on hot summer days...
HALL: Mm-hmm.
RAJ: ...make sure you're well hydrated.
HALL: That's a good time--a good point for this time of the year.
RAJ: Yeah.
HALL: And not being active in activity? How does that cause--I mean, you would think that that's your relaxed mode.
RAJ: Yeah. Yeah. You know what, it's been shown that exercise--people who exercise regularly get less headaches than people who don't. So we're not exactly sure why, it may have to do with the blood that's circulating, getting to your brain, you know, really refreshing everything. But it's just important for every part of your life to exercise but also for your headaches.
HALL: Right. So another good reason to exercise.
RAJ: Yeah.
HALL: And this is another one people identify with, sleep deprivation. You just don't get enough sleep and you even wake up sometimes with a headache.
RAJ: That's right. So studies have shown people who get six hours or fewer of sleep...
HALL: Uh-huh.
RAJ: ...have more headaches, so try to get more of that. The other thing is to maintain a regular sleep routine, it's very tempting to sleep in on the weekends till noon...
HALL: Mm-hmm.
RAJ: ...but it really messes up your entire sleep schedule. So that could make headaches worse. You want to maintain the same bedtime, the same time you wake up.
HALL: All right. Thank you so much. And there are some things--foods that can cause headaches: Red wine, beer, MSG, chocolate all on that list that we see here.
RAJ: That's right. Those are triggers for some people, not everybody.
HALL: All right. We'll be aware of those things. Great advice. Thank you so much, Dr. Roshini Raj.
RAJ: Thank you, Tamron.
HALL: Great pleasure.