

Headache-Proof Your Home

Dim the lights, nix indoor allergens, and other pain-stopping strategies.

By Andrea Bartz

Consider tinted lenses for your glasses to reduce glare.

Turn down the lights: A soft glow is least likely to bring on head pain.

Vacuum upholstered furniture twice a week to get rid of allergens.

HOME SWEET HOME.

The place where you can put up your feet, relax, and...get a headache? Even those who aren't especially prone to pain can be susceptible to the triggers that hole up in your house. Thankfully, you (and your head) don't have to be held hostage: "You can considerably cut down on the number of headaches you get by controlling factors such as the lighting and smells," says neurologist Brian Grosberg, MD. Here, four simple ways to turn your abode into a headache-free zone.

Lower the lights

If you're one of the 30 million Americans who get migraines, overly bright lights at home can be a big problem. The brains of folks who suffer from these intense headaches are often extra sensitive to sensory input, and the glaring light from bulbs or even sunlight can cause head-splitting pain, explains Deborah Friedman, MD, a neurologist at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. The flickering quality of fluorescent

lights can likewise bring on pain, adds Peter Goadsby, MD, director of the Headache Center at the University of California-San Francisco.

THE FIX: While there's no perfect lightbulb option, dim incandescent bulbs (the lower the wattage, the better) are generally preferable to halogens and fluorescents because they emit a steadier, more muted light. Install dimmers so you can darken a room when you feel a headache coming on, Dr. Goadsby advises. And hang blinds or shades to shield you from any streaming sunlight.

Ditch hidden allergens

More than half of all homes have six or more detectable allergens inside, research shows. If you suffer from allergies, those snuffle-and-sneeze triggers can lead to headaches, too. Why? Irritants such as dust mites (microscopic creatures found in house dust), dander, and mold “inflamm[e] the nasal passages, which releases a pain-signaling chemical that can trigger a headache,” Dr. Grosberg explains. Also, allergy-related congestion can cause a painful buildup of pressure in your nasal passages and sinuses.

THE FIX: Invest in a quality vacuum and an air purifier with HEPA filters, says Jonathan Bernstein, MD, an allergist at the University of Cincinnati. HEPA filters can remove up to 99 percent of airborne allergens like cat dander. Regularly run a dehumidifier to keep your home’s humidity levels

between 30 percent and 50 percent, a dry zone at which dust mites and mold are less likely to thrive. Launder bedding weekly in hot water, and slip microfiber allergen-blocking encasements over your pillows, mattress, and box spring, advises Jackie Eghrari-Sabet, MD, an allergist in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

Eliminate strong smells

Believe it or not, the air quality inside most of our homes is worse than it is outside—levels of about a dozen common pollutants such as formaldehyde are two to five times higher indoors, largely because of inadequate ventilation. Masking odors with scented candles and air fresheners often makes matters worse, as many of these products contain the same volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that are in paint fumes and floor varnish, according to new research. Intense aromas of any kind

irritate the trigeminal nerve, which runs from your nose to your brain and is responsible for most headaches, Dr. Goadsby explains.

THE FIX: Crack your windows regularly, choose unscented, nontoxic cleaners, and trash products that are a few years old—their containers can begin to leak, emitting a stink, Dr. Grosberg says. Pick low-VOC paints and avoid buying furniture made from particleboard, because it may release the VOC formaldehyde. If you have smells you can’t control (like cigarette smoke coming from a neighbor’s condo), use an air purifier with a carbon filter, which cuts down on headache-causing odors.

Control your glowing gadgets

The super bright screens of some glowing gizmos (laptops, tablets) carry the same hazards as bright lights—their white glow can overstimulate

the brain, Dr. Friedman says. Also, sitting at the counter or on the sofa hunched over your iPhone or laptop may bring on muscle-related throbbing. “Having bad posture while you use electronics can crunch the neck muscles, sending pain signals up into the brain, triggering a headache,” Dr. Friedman explains.

THE FIX: Adjust the brightness setting on your gadgets so they don’t bother you, and get a glare-reducing filter for your monitor. Settle into a seat with good back support and make sure your laptop or e-reader is at eye level, advises Alan Hedge, PhD, director of the Cornell Human Factors and Ergonomics Research Laboratory in Ithaca, New York. One final tip: “Taking a break every 20 minutes will loosen up the muscles,” adds Hedge, “and dramatically reduce the likelihood of getting a headache.” 📌

HEADACHE-PROOF YOUR DIET, TOO!

Not sure why your head’s pounding? It could be what you’re eating and drinking, says Dr. Friedman. Keep a food diary to see if there’s a pattern, and watch out for these common culinary culprits.



AGED FOODS AND DRINKS

> Aged cheese, dried fruit, and cured meats contain tyramine, which may force blood vessels to constrict and then expand, potentially causing pain.



ASPARTAME

> Experts aren’t sure why, but the artificial sweetener can bring on headaches. If you’re sensitive to it, check the ingredient list of diet sodas and juices.



ADDITIVES

> MSG, a flavor enhancer used in some packaged and takeout foods, may cause vascular changes that trigger pain. Look for labels that say “No MSG.”



ALCOHOL

> Many wines and beers contain tyramine as well as sulfites and nitrates, preservatives that can contribute to headaches.