

MIGRAINE

Exercise is effective as a nonpharmacological approach to reduce the frequency of migraines

Researchers in Sweden have shown that exercise is equally efficient to common pharmacological and nonpharmacological therapies for the prophylactic treatment of migraine.

“Migraine is a serious health problem, with huge consequences for the individual as well as for society,” says Emma Varkey, lead author of the study published in *Cephalalgia*. “There is not enough scientific evidence to draw conclusions about the effects of exercise on migraines.”

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Previous research by Varkey and colleagues showed that people with headaches were less active than headache-free individuals and that exercise was well-tolerated in patients who had regular

migraines. The current study—a single-center, prospective randomized controlled trial—aimed to investigate the effect of exercise in migraine prevention. “We chose this study design to compare exercise to common nonpharmacological and pharmacological methods of migraine prophylaxis,” explains Varkey.

91 patients were included in the trial; each individual was randomly allocated to an exercise group (40 min of exercise, three times per week), a relaxation therapy group (using breathing and stress-management techniques) or a group that received daily doses (up to 200 mg) of topiramate—an antiepileptic drug that is registered for the treatment of migraines. Treatment lasted for 3 months and the patients were monitored for migraine frequency and pain severity over a 6-month period.

Compared with baseline (at which point the number of migraine attacks was defined as 1.0), patients in the exercise, relaxation and topiramate groups had

mean reductions in migraine frequency of 0.93, 0.83 and 0.97, respectively. No significant difference was observed between the groups. “Exercise was found to be equal to the well-documented methods of relaxation and topiramate with regard to the reduction of migraine frequency,” summarizes Varkey.

As Varkey points out, the optimum frequency, duration and intensity of exercise for migraine prophylaxis remains to be investigated. “This nonpharmacological approach may be an option for the prophylactic treatment of migraine in patients who do not benefit from, or do not want to take, daily medication,” she concludes.

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Original article Varkey, E. *et al.* Exercise as migraine prophylaxis: a randomized study using relaxation and topiramate as controls. *Cephalalgia* doi:10.1177/0333102411419681