

Subject: 🧠 "Happy" National Migraine Awareness Day 🧠

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🧠 **MIGRAINE AWARENESS DAY** 🧠
(yes, we're aware)



"Artist Rendition of Author Dictating This Newsletter", Pencil and Ink on Paper, 2025

Ironically, I am dictating this newsletter from under roughly four hundred pounds of blanket and a stack of pillows that are blocking out all light and sound. The inside of my brain is on fire and being squeezed with heavy metal bands lined with sharp spikes on the inside, which is very interesting since the brain technically cannot feel pain. There is also a compression-style ice pack attempting to dull some of the nerve endings that are throbbing like a San Francisco disco in the mid 1970s.

Today is [National Migraine Awareness Day](#). I am very much aware of migraines, but maybe you are one of the blessed, charmed many who are not as aware, who do not suffer the debilitating and horrific experiences of Eldritch-horror-level headaches that probably inspired multiple torture methods throughout the centuries.



Migraines come in multiple flavors, and some (most) people get more than one. There are the menstrual migraines that happen during hormone fluctuations, usually in the luteal phase of those who are gynecological endowed. There are tension headaches that cascade into full sensory overload. Some are reactions to minuscule changes in barometric pressure or seasonal pollen. Others (many) are *idiopathic*, seemingly coming out of nowhere, or maybe are triggered by different types of stress, perfume, air temperature, spinal posture, or food additives.

But what's the difference between a *migraine* and a *regular headache*? There is no single answer, but the most common features of migraines include an **intense sensitivity and rejection to light, to sound, and to movement**. They can include that crushing squeezing band that goes all the way around the head, and it often activates inflammation of various nerves, including the one that runs right behind the jaw bone: one of my least favorite flaws in the human design is that the *Vomit Button* is so inconveniently located at the

back of the ear.



All these different types of migraines mean multiple types of treatments with varying degrees of efficacy. For the average person who might experience their migraines with an aura, the “classic cocktail” of acetaminophen, ibuprofen (or aspirin), and caffeine taken together at the very first onset of signal is enough to prevent its rise in agony, or at least to mitigate it. Others have to step up their game, pursuing prescription medications like topiramate (Topamax) and valproic acid (Depakote), but both of these come with significant side effects. Newer generations of migraine treatment include medications like rimegepant (Nurtec) that dissolves under the tongue, or fremanezumab (Ajovy), a once-a-month injection. There are even more direct interventions like occipital nerve blocks, wherein cortisone and lidocaine are injected directly in the back of the head at the occipital lobe in order to interrupt the disturbances that can lead to untold levels of horrific... I need another word for “agony”.

That dimension of nerve inflammation can set off separate atypical trigeminal activation. That’s a vital nerve branch on either side of the face that runs around the orbital of the eye, the top of the teeth, the bottom of the jaw, and behind the ears. It originates at the top of the brain stem at the pons, deep beneath the folds of convulsions made of white and grey matter, which means it is very, very difficult to locate and treat any damage there. (Nothing like a little light brain surgery to make life more interesting, eh? Except it doesn’t work for bilateral migraines.)





Migraines are no laughing matter, being the second leading cause of debilitation and long-term disability in the United States. There is a word for conditions that are resistant to treatment, not *refractory*... **intractable**. That's the word. (Brain fog is another common symptom.) There are a small number of migraines that are *intractable*, that do not respond well to any form of treatment, that can only be minimized or managed. This cycle of unpredictable patterns of pain and sensitivity and brain fog (did I mention that already?) and ear aches and nausea, unsurprisingly, also tend to lead to high levels of depression and anxiety in chronic migraine sufferers. Autistics and neurodiverse people (who also disproportionately experience multiple types of migraines) often find that intense smells are one of their biggest migraine triggers, which is why going to the grocery store can be an exercise in self-inflicted hell.

The beautiful news is that science marches forward and every day we are given new and exciting ways to try to address this problem. It does take a bit of ingenuity, and also having access to doctors who are interested in actually finding causes instead of following what it says in the textbook – many of which were written back when they thought migraines were just really bad headaches and not their own unique condition. The triggers will often point to their remedies: Some are stress-induced and can be treated with blood pressure medication. Others are triggered by certain foods indicating an inappropriate immunological response.





I mentioned briefly before that there was a **migraine with aura**, distinct from **migraines without aura**. But what is an aura? No, it is not the woo-woo field of energy that surrounds all things: An aura is a *visual precursor* that usually starts off as a blind spot, like you have a smudge on your glasses that you can't quite see through, even if you don't wear glasses. Then, that spot grows and is surrounded by a halo of distortion where colors are refracted and separated, almost like a prism, but not nearly as pretty or easy to appreciate because you can also feel the pressure in the front of the face building while that aura grows and grows. That spot of blindness takes over more and more of your field of vision, and by the time it has grown and disappeared, it is too late: the migraine is here and it wishes you poor health and excruciating discomfort. (Did I already use the word "excruciating"...?)

Oh, but the sad irony of sometimes wishing that all migraines came with auras so that at least you'd be *warned*! As I said, for many remedies, if you take them at the first signs of trouble, the migraine will never fully manifest itself. Some types of migraines don't have auras or precursors of any kind: sometimes you just wake up with your sinuses blazing with fire and a demonic squid squeezing half of your brain, injecting fire and salt directly into the nerves, or your eyeballs just throbbing so hard it's easy to imagine they'd explode at any moment. If your unfriendly international spider-fiend starts up in the middle of the night like when a storm front or a dust storm rolls in, you don't have the opportunity to get to a remedy in time - and then you're just [REDACTED].





So on this, the National Migraine Awareness Day, for those of you who regularly suffer, we salute you in solidarity. We offer you solace and many wishes for access to compression ice packs, light-impenetrable blindfolds, the gentlest of brown noise generators, and a steady supply of useful medication and strong coffee.

For those of you who are the friends, partners, or family of those who suffer from migraines, we implore you to be gentle and loving and compassionate to your migraine-suffering associates. Normal headaches are the sort that most people can kind of work through: it's uncomfortable, but it's not impossible. Migraines aren't like that. Sufferers rely very heavily (if they can) on those around them to remember to feed the dogs, let out the cats, force them to eat something salty for the nausea, and generally make sure the world doesn't fall apart in their absence.

And also to those who neither have migraines nor know anyone with migraines, I am deeply and enormously jealous of you. If you ever wanted to wish something truly crippling to your worst enemy without having experienced it yourself, might I suggest an idiopathic and intractable form of migraine syndrome.

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