



# Exploring the Link Between IBS and Headaches

by ANGELA FINLAY

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## Recent Research Uncovers an Important Link Between IBS and Headaches

If you find your head and intestines seem to team up against you, rest assured you're certainly not alone. Headaches are not only common, but they affect the majority of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) patients, and a significant percentage also experience migraines alongside their IBS.

In the past decade, more attention has turned to the apparent relationship between headaches and gastrointestinal problems, and research has uncovered an undeniable link. Confirming that link between the two painful disorders was a big win for IBS patients, but what might be *causing* this link has remained unclear — until recently.

A study out of Istanbul University in Turkey in February 2016 might have found a new piece of the puzzle, bringing hope for better treatment. While brain and body function are evidently connected, genetics may play a bigger role than previously thought in a person's risk for both sets of disorders.

## The Link Between Your Brain and Your Gut

It might seem like they're two vastly different systems, but what goes on in your brain can impact what happens in your stomach, and vice versa.

For instance, those who suffer from migraines know all too well how the head pain can translate to nausea and diarrhea as the attack strengthens, and the pain and stress that comes with an IBS episode is enough to cause your neck and face muscles to tense up. However, there are also some science-backed explanations to go along with this anecdotal evidence.

### Nerve Sensitivity

Both IBS patients and those who suffer from migraine pain are more likely to also experience fibromyalgia and depression — two disorders that inflate your pain. Leading theories suggest that all of these painful conditions could be tied to a biological abnormality that heightens your sensitivity to pain.

Essentially, your nervous system becomes overactive, eventually leading to a chronic pain response that manifests in a number of ways, and in a number of areas.

### Stress

Emotional and psychological tension can accumulate quickly, and the results can be more harmful than you might imagine. A body that is overly stressed will fall out of hormonal balance, and certain neurotransmitters — like serotonin — can fail to play their important role in brain function, pain regulation and intestinal health.

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Where stress is involved, the degree of tension directly impacts the frequency of headaches and IBS attacks. Since stress can build up from a range of events and processes, it usually takes a multi-faceted approach to get back to a calmer state.

### **What the Recent Research Shows**

The big breakthrough comes in the form of a deeper understanding of genetically-related problems. This specific study, led by Dr. Derya Uluduz, followed a range of subjects: 107 people with migraine, 53 with tension headaches, 107 with IBS, and 53 with none of these conditions.

The researchers looked for two particular genes relating to serotonin (a transporter gene and a receptor gene), and found that those with headaches or IBS had at least one gene that differed from the healthy participants.

Although the migraine, headache and IBS groups weren't exactly the same in terms of genes, the fact that they shared some genetic commonalities — which were also absent in the healthy control group — is a strong indication that there's a strong link between these pain disorders at the genetic level.

Experts are excited with these results, since this is the first study of its kind, although the link isn't completely new. For instance, researchers have already uncovered the connection between serotonin and gut function as well as serotonin and brain function; the study confirms that certain serotonin-specific genes are indeed a part of the puzzle, and this suggests that previous research was on the right track. Step by step, the picture is becoming clearer.

### **What Does This Mean for Patients?**

Chronic headaches, migraines and IBS aren't only comparably uncomfortable, they are also equally difficult to treat. For many, it takes years of trial and error to find an appropriate management strategy, while many more go undiagnosed for a long time.

If genetics are at the heart of the disorders, and advancing research is able to define the precise problems in the exact genes, there's a much greater chance of diagnosing either condition more quickly and accurately. Moreover, it's more likely that scientists can develop a treatment that targets the root of the problem, rather than simply helping you to cope with the symptoms.

In the meantime, it's important to respect the brain-gut connection when you seek treatment and make lifestyle adjustments for your IBS or headaches. A good diet, along with stress control and up-to-date knowledge of your condition remain crucial elements in any IBS/headache management plan.