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Good news: Migraines hurt your head but not your brain

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Migraines currently affect about 20 percent of the female population, and while these headaches are common, there are many unanswered questions surrounding this complex disease. Previous studies have linked this disorder to an increased risk of stroke and structural brain lesions, but it has remained unclear whether migraines had other negative consequences such as dementia or cognitive decline. According to new research from Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH), migraines are not associated with cognitive decline.

This study is published online by the British Medical Journal (*BMJ*) on August 8, 2012. "Previous studies on migraines and cognitive decline were small and unable to identify a link between the two. Our study was large enough to draw the conclusion that migraines, while painful, are not strongly linked to cognitive decline," explained Pamela Rist ScD, a research fellow in the Division of Preventive Medicine at BWH, and lead author on this study.

The research team analyzed data from the Women's Health Study, a cohort of nearly 40,000 women, 45 years and older. In this study, researchers analyzed data from 6,349 women who provided information about migraine status at baseline and then participated in cognitive testing during follow-up. Participants were classified into four groups: no history of migraine, migraine with aura (transient neurology symptoms mostly of the visual field), migraine without aura, and past history of migraine. Cognitive testing was carried out in two year intervals up to three times.

"Compared with women with no history of migraine, those who experienced migraine with or without aura did not have significantly different rates of cognitive decline," explained Rist. "This is an important finding for both physicians and patients. Patients with migraine and their treating doctors should be reassured that migraine may not have long term consequences on cognitive function."

There is still a lot that is unknown about migraines. However this study offers promising evidence for patients and their treating physicians. More research needs to be done to understand the consequences of migraine on the brain and to establish strategies to influence the course of the disease in order to optimize treatment strategies.

Provided by Brigham and Women's Hospital