

# Unitary Hypothesis for Multiple Triggers of the Pain and Strain of Migraine

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## ABSTRACT

Migraine headache is triggered by and associated with a variety of hormonal, emotional, nutritional, and physiological changes. The perception of migraine headache is formed when nociceptive signals originating in the meninges are conveyed to the somatosensory cortex through the trigeminal ganglion, medullary dorsal horn, and thalamus. Is there a common descending pathway accounting for the activation of meningeal nociceptors by different migraine triggers? We propose that different migraine triggers activate a wide variety of brain areas that impinge on parasympathetic neurons innervating the meninges. According to this hypothesis, migraine triggers such as perfume, stress, or awakening activate multiple hypothalamic, limbic, and cortical areas, all of which contain neurons that project to the preganglionic parasympathetic neurons in the superior salivatory nucleus (SSN). The SSN, in turn, activates postganglionic parasympathetic neurons in the sphenopalatine ganglion, resulting in vasodilation and local release of inflammatory molecules that activate meningeal nociceptors. Are there ascending pathways through which the trigeminovascular system can induce the wide variety of migraine symptoms? We propose that trigeminovascular projections from the medullary dorsal horn to selective areas in the midbrain, hypothalamus, amygdala, and basal forebrain are functionally positioned to produce migraine symptoms such as irritability, loss of appetite, fatigue, depression, or the quest for solitude. Bidirectional trafficking by which the trigeminovascular system can activate the same brain areas that have triggered its own activity in the first place provides an attractive network of perpetual feedback that drives a migraine attack for many hours and even days. *J. Comp. Neurol.* 493:9–14, 2005. © 2005 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

**Indexing terms:** headache; PAG; nociception; trigeminal; stress; sleep; olfaction

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## ANATOMY OF THE PAIN

Migraine is a recurring neurological disorder commonly described as unilateral throbbing headache, readily aggravated by routine activities. The sensory discriminative aspect of migraine pain is mediated by activation and modulation of nociceptive trigeminohalamic tract neurons by peripheral *drivers* and central *modulators*, respectively. In the case of the trigeminohalamic tract, the role of driver is played by meningeal nociceptors, whereas modulation is provided by inhibitory and facilitatory neurons in the brainstem. Evidence for the driving role of meningeal nociceptors comes from studies in which awake patients experienced headache in response to electrical stimulation of their dura (Penfield and McNaughton, 1940; Ray and Wolff, 1940). Evidence for descending modulation comes from studies that examined the effects of electrical stimulation of the periaqueductal gray (PAG) and rostral ventromedial medulla (RVM) on nociceptive

spinal neurons. Whereas electrical brainstem stimulation per se did not induce any activity in the spinal nociceptive neurons when they were quiet, it clearly increased or decreased their response magnitude to noxious and innocuous stimulation of their cutaneous and visceral receptive fields (Porreca et al., 2002).

The initiation of migraine headache is commonly associated with a wide variety of circumstances, such as hor-

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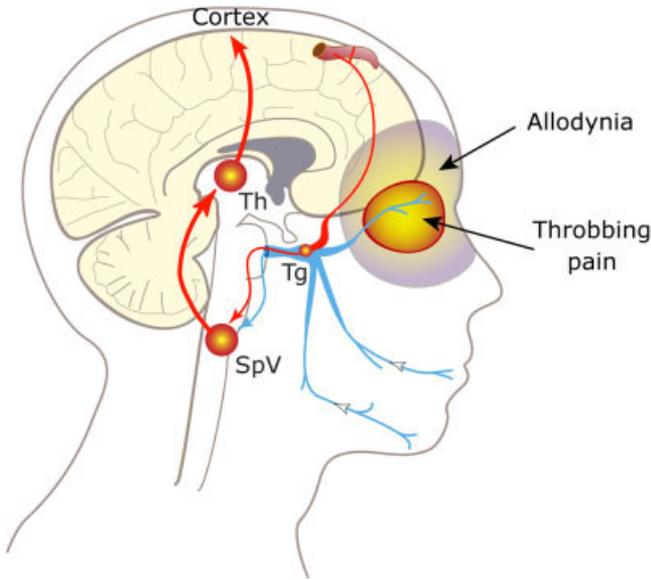


Fig. 1. The trigeminovascular pathway subserving migraine pain. Neurons in the trigeminal ganglion (Tg) that innervate the meninges (i.e., meningeal nociceptors) carry pain signals to trigeminovascular neurons in the spinal trigeminal nucleus (SpV). From there the pain signals are conveyed to several thalamic nuclei (Th) en route to the somatosensory cortex, where the perception of pain is formed.

monal milieu, periods of stress, poststress periods, skipping a meal, lack of sleep, olfactory stimulation, and several types of aura (Liveing, 1873; Zagami and Rasmussen, 2000). These associations raise the possibility that a migraine attack originates in brain areas that are not directly involved in nociception, but are wired to activate the trigeminovascular pathway. The trigeminovascular pathway consists of first-order nociceptors in the trigeminal ganglion that innervate the meninges; second-order trigeminothalamic tract neurons that receive sensory inputs from the meninges, periorbital skin and neck muscles; third-order thalamocortical neurons that process incoming pain signals from the trigeminal nerve, including the meninges; and cortical neurons located in the first somatosensory cortex (Fig. 1).

### ANATOMY OF THE STRAIN: ACTIVATION OF THE TRIGEMINOVASCULAR PATHWAY BY THE LIMBIC SYSTEM AND HYPOTHALAMUS

The observation that visual aura precedes the onset of headache by several minutes promoted extensive research on the neural substrate by which cortical spreading depression can result in activation of meningeal nociceptors. In the wake of cortical spreading depression, the blood-brain barrier becomes more permeable (Moskowitz and Cutrer, 1993; Gursoy-Ozdemir et al., 2004), allowing potassium and hydrogen ions to diffuse from the surface of the cortex to the pia where they activate C-fiber meningeal nociceptors (Moskowitz and Macfarlane, 1993). This activation appears to involve direct depolarization by potassium ions and action of hydrogen ions through the vallinoid receptor (Caterina et al., 1997) or the acid-

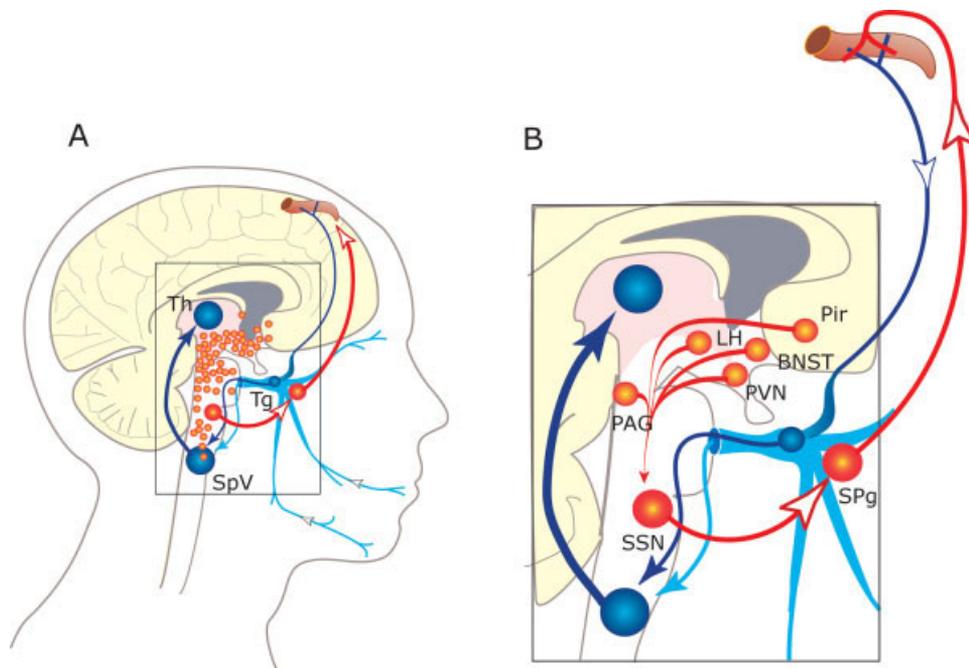
sensitive ion channel receptor (Waldmann et al., 1997). Consequently, the activated meningeal nociceptors release calcitonin-gene-related peptide (Ebersberger et al., 1999) from their peripheral branches, resulting in neurogenic inflammation in the dura (Goadsby and Edvinsson, 1993).

In contrast to the ongoing effort to understand how aura triggers activity in meningeal nociceptors, little attention was given to the mechanisms by which brain areas involved in regulation of stress, menstrual cycle, sleep, food intake, or responses to olfactory stimuli could activate meningeal nociceptors and trigger the headache. Is there a common pathway that activates meningeal nociceptors for a variety of migraine triggers? We are proposing that such a pathway involves pre- and postganglionic parasympathetic neurons in the superior salivatory nucleus (SSN) and sphenopalatine ganglion (SPG), respectively. According to our hypothesis, migraine triggers either activate or originate in a number of brain areas whose projections converge on the SSN. The SSN, in turn, stimulates the release of acetyl choline, vasopressin intestinal peptide, and nitric oxide from meningeal terminals of SPG neurons, resulting (directly or indirectly) in a cascade of events that include the dilation of intracranial blood vessels, plasma protein extravasation, and local release of inflammatory molecules that activate adjacent terminals of meningeal nociceptors.

Several lines of evidence support this parasympathetic hypothesis: 1) meningeal blood vessels are densely innervated by parasympathetic fibers (Larsson et al., 1976; Nozaki et al., 1993; Suzuki and Hardebo, 1993); 2) preganglionic parasympathetic neurons in the superior salivatory nucleus increase their activity after activation of meningeal nociceptors (Knight et al., 2005); 3) ongoing activity in meningeal nociceptors appears to depend on enhanced activity in the SPG (Bolay et al., 2002); 4) parasympathetic tone is enhanced during migraine, as evidenced by lacrimation, teary eyes, nasal congestion (Liveing, 1873); and 5) blockade of the sphenopalatine ganglion provides partial or complete relief of migraine pain (Sluder, 1908; Dalessio, 1980; Kudrow, 1980; Diamond and Dalessio, 1982; Waldman, 1990, 1993; Reutens et al., 1991; Kudrow et al., 1995; Maizels et al., 1996; Yarnitsky et al., 2003).

The SSN receives extensive input from more than 50 brain areas distributed throughout the forebrain, diencephalon, midbrain, pons, and medulla (Spencer et al., 1990). SSN-projecting neurons located in some of these brain areas are theoretically positioned to mediate the onset of a migraine by means of their involvement in olfactory perception, physiological functions, emotional responses, and hormonal secretions (Fig. 2A). The neuroanatomy of a few examples is illustrated in Figure 2B. The piriform cortex processes olfactory information (Wilson, 2001) and may therefore be positioned to mediate the action of migraine-triggering odorants, such as perfume or fried food. The lateral hypothalamus and perifornical area contain hypocretinergic neurons that become active during food deprivation (Qu et al., 1996; Sakurai et al., 1998; Elmquist et al., 1999; Diano et al., 2003) and sleep deprivation (Yoshida et al., 2001; Zeitzer et al., 2003); such hypocretinergic neurons may mediate the triggering of a migraine attack when the patient skips a meal or when the patient is mildly sleep-deprived. The tuberomammillary nucleus (TMN) contains histaminergic neurons that

Fig. 2. A proposed parasympathetic pathway for the activation of meningeal nociceptors. Preganglionic parasympathetic neurons in the superior salivatory nucleus (SSN) can trigger intracranial vasodilation and the release of nitric oxide in the meninges through postganglionic parasympathetic neurons in the sphenopalatine ganglion (SPG). **A:** The SSN receives input from over 50 limbic and hypothalamic brain areas (red dots) whose activity may be influenced by common migraine triggers. **B:** Examples of SSN afferents proposed to be involved in migraine triggering by olfactory stimuli (Pir), food and sleep deprivation (LH), stress or poststress (PVN, BNST, PAG). BNST, bed nucleus stria terminalis; LH, lateral hypothalamus; PAG, periaqueductal gray; Pir, piriform cortex; PVN, paraventricular hypothalamic nucleus.



begin to fire at the end of the sleep period and have been implicated in cortical arousal and the process of waking up (Schwartz et al., 1991; Lin et al., 1996; Steininger et al., 1999); such arousal neurons may also be involved in the triggering of early-morning migraine. The bed nucleus of stria terminalis (BNST), the paraventricular hypothalamic nucleus (PVN), and the PAG are all involved in the circuitry that regulates “stress response.” BNST neurons, which regulate the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis, appear to mediate long-lasting behavioral responses during sustained stress, which persist long after the termination of stress (Walker et al., 2003; Forray and Gysling, 2004); such neurons may be involved in stress-induced migraine and also in migraine triggered after the termination of stress. Parvocellular PVN neurons that project to sympathetic and parasympathetic preganglionic neurons in the brainstem and spinal cord promote the autonomic part of the stress response (Swanson and Sawchenko, 1980; Coote, 2005), which includes localized cerebrovascular vasodilation in the early phase of the migraine attack (Olesen, 1998). Ventrolateral PAG neurons involved in passive emotional coping with inescapable stressors such as repeated defeat in social encounters (Bandler et al., 2000; Key and Bandler, 2001) may mediate the onset of increased migraine frequency associated with a long period of social stress such as divorce.

### ANATOMY OF THE STRAIN: ACTIVATION OF THE HYPOTHALAMUS AND LIMBIC SYSTEM BY THE TRIGEMINOVASCULAR PATHWAY

The most frequently reported symptoms associated with migraine are depression, stress, irritability, fatigue, sleepiness, exaggerated emotional responses, nausea, and loss of appetite. To elicit these symptoms, pain signals that originate in the trigeminovascular pathway during mi-

graine must reach and alter the activity of hypothalamic and limbic structures that integrate sensory, physiological, and cognitive signals that drive behavioral, affective, and autonomic responses. Brain areas involved in the execution of such responses include the parabrachial complex, PAG, hypothalamus, amygdala, septum, nucleus accumbens, bed nucleus of the stria terminalis, and basal ganglia (Norgren, 1970; Panksepp, 1971; Kruk et al., 1983; Swanson, 1987; Lin et al., 1989; Bernardis and Bellinger, 1993, 1998; Roeling et al., 1993; Scammell et al., 1993; Simerly, 1995; Saper, 1995; Sherin et al., 1996; Peyron et al., 1998). Many of these brain areas receive direct inputs from laminae I–II and V neurons located in the ventrolateral area of the upper cervical and medullary dorsal horn (Fig. 3A)—an area containing the majority of second-order trigeminovascular neurons (Burstein and Giesler, 1989; Burstein et al., 1990; Key and Bandler, 1992; Burstein and Potrebic, 1993; Strassman et al., 1994; Bernard et al., 1995; Bester et al., 1995; Vanderhorst et al., 1996; Malick and Burstein, 1998; Malick et al., 2000).

We propose that these ascending pathways are functionally positioned to produce irritability, loss of appetite, sleepiness, fatigue, chill, stress, depression, emotional arousal, decreased motivation, the quest for solitude, and lethargy during migraine (Fig. 3B). For example, loss of appetite, sleepiness, and irritability during migraine may be mediated by trigeminovascular projections to the lateral hypothalamus; in this area, neurons expressing melanin-concentrating hormone or hypocretin regulate food and water intake, sleep, and arousal (Lin et al., 1989; Peyron et al., 1998; Chemelli et al., 1999) through widespread projections to the cerebral cortex, brainstem, and spinal cord (Bittencourt et al., 1992; Bittencourt and Elias, 1993; Sakurai et al., 1998; van den Pol, 1999; Elmquist et al., 1999). Migraine-associated stress may be mediated by trigeminovascular projections to the paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus; this nucleus con-

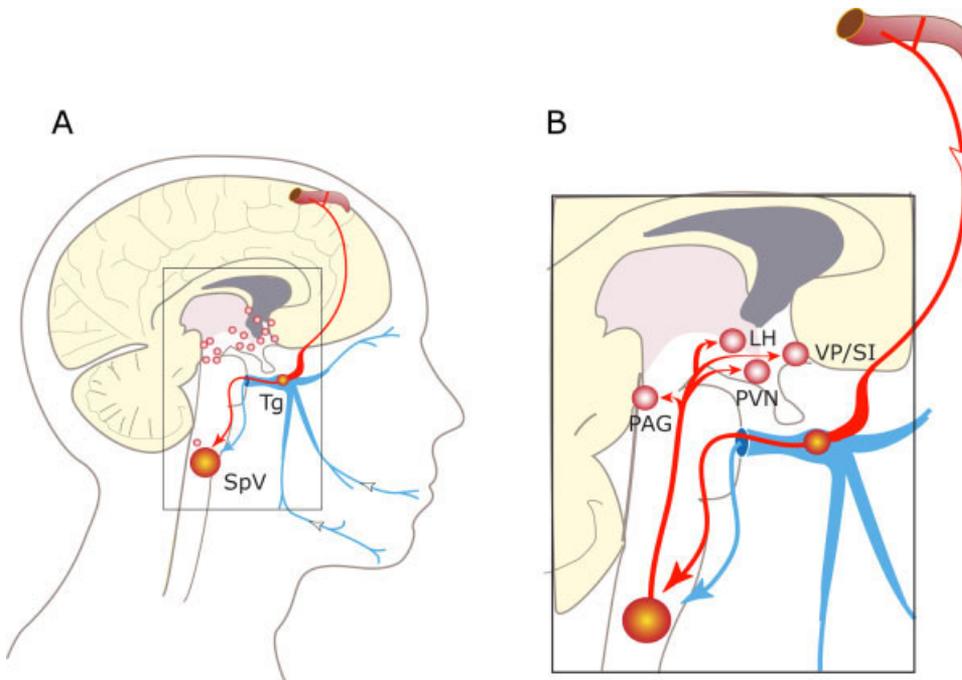


Fig. 3. Proposed mechanism for the initiation of symptoms commonly associated with migraine headache by ascending trigemino-vascular pathways to the brainstem, hypothalamus, and basal ganglia. **A:** Trigemino-vascular neurons in the spinal trigeminal nucleus (SpV) project to multiple limbic and hypothalamic brain areas (red dots) whose activity may underlie common migraine symptoms. **B:** Examples of SpV projections proposed to be involved in stress (PVN), decreased motivational state (VP/SI), pursuit of solitude (PAG), sleepiness, irritability, and loss of appetite (LH). LH, lateral hypothalamus; PAG, periaqueductal gray; PVN, paraventricular hypothalamic nucleus; VP/SI, ventral pallidum/substantia innominata.

tains neurons expressing corticotrophin-releasing hormone and oxytocin which regulate stress responses (Armstrong, 1995). Emotional arousal and decreased motivation during migraine may be mediated by trigemino-vascular projections to forebrain nuclei such as the ventral pallidum and substantia innominata; these areas can alter endocrine, autonomic, and somatomotor functions to match different emotional and motivational states (Heimer et al., 1997).

The pursuit of solitude during migraine may be mediated by the ventrolateral PAG; this area receives more input from trigeminal neurons located in C1–3 and nucleus caudalis than from the entire spinal cord (Keay and Bandler, 1992, 2001; Vanderhorst et al., 1996). The input to the ventrolateral PAG originates mainly in visceral and deep somatic tissues (Keay et al., 1994; Clement et al., 2000). Trigemino-vascular projections to the ventrolateral PAG can activate neurons that mediate responses to deep, inescapable pain, such as migraine pain (Depaulis et al., 1994; Keay and Bandler, 2001).

### SUMMARY

The same hypothalamic, limbic, and cortical areas that project to the SSN also appear to receive extensive afferent connections from the trigemino-vascular pathway. This provides a neuroanatomical roadmap by which the trigemino-vascular pathway can activate the same brain areas that have triggered its own activity in the first place. Such a network of bidirectional trafficking provides an attractive mechanism of perpetual feedback that drives a migraine attack for many hours and even days. Therefore, enhanced activity of any structure in this network during a migraine attack, as shown by functional MRI, cannot be simply interpreted as “migraine generators” because it is also likely to be driven by the migraine pain itself.

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