

What's your headache trying to tell you?

Lingering headaches are miserable – but before reaching for the painkillers, says Karena du Plessis, discover the cause.

Headaches are a ubiquitous health problem: 80 percent of us experience them, and the cause can be anything from hormonal changes to stress or a lack of sleep. It's tempting to pop a painkiller whenever one hits, but that isn't necessarily the best way to stop the pain.

There are numerous triggers, which is partly due to the structure of the nerves in the brain. 'Because headache pain signals come in from different places, you need a multi-disciplinary assessment. No one doctor will have all the expertise necessary to make a diagnosis,' says Dr Elliot Shevel from The Headache Clinic, which has branches in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban.

Some headache triggers are more direct. A lack of caffeine causes withdrawal headaches and many migraines are brought on by blood vessels under the skin expanding, irritating the nerves around them. Hormonal headaches

can be linked to pain-inducing chemicals at the time of menstruation.

'One of the worst things you can do is ease headaches with pain medication – you're just treating the symptom, and this may cause them to get worse,' continues Shevel. ■▶

When not to ignore a headache

A headache alone is rarely a sign of illness, but, occasionally, when combined with other symptoms, it can signal a more serious problem such as a stroke, brain tumour or meningitis. If your headache is accompanied by neck stiffness, fever, mental confusion, difficulty speaking, numbness, tingling or paralysis of any part of the body, then see your GP or go to a casualty ward immediately. Any severe headache that interferes with your life should also be checked out – not just for the sake of your health, but for the sake of your sanity. Even the worst pain can usually be controlled with the help of an expert.

BEFORE YOU OPEN YOUR MEDICINE CABINET, CONSIDER THIS...

THE SYMPTOMS

THE FASTEST CURE

Is it stress-related?

■ Tension-type headaches are the most common sort. The pain feels as though something is pressing your skull. These headaches vary in intensity and duration, lasting from 30 minutes to several days.

■ Any painkiller washed down with a cup of coffee will offer faster relief than if you take it with water, but, cautions Dr Elliot Shevel from The Headache Clinic, 'while this might offer instant relief, in the long term it can contribute to medication-overuse headaches, as a lot of headache medication already contains caffeine'.

Is it sinus-related?

■ The sinuses are air-filtering pockets around the cheekbones, eyes and nose. If they get blocked, pressure builds, causing pain around these areas.

■ 'A regimen of topical decongestants, including salt-water douches, steaming and possibly steroids, to clear the nose and restore drainage to the obstructed sinuses will help,' says Cape Town GP Dr Jon Cornell.

Is it a migraine?

■ Many people who get painful headaches that they believe are stress-related are actually migraine sufferers. Think about how the pain feels. Migraines emerge as a severe throbbing pain on one side of your head, often accompanied by nausea, vomiting, light/noise sensitivity and/or disturbed vision.

■ Your digestive system starts to shut down the second a migraine hits, so reach for a suitable formula, such as Imigran, as soon as possible. The newest prevention method is Botox injections. 'It inhibits the release of neurotransmitters involved in the generation of pain,' explains Cape Town plastic surgeon Dr Nerina Wilkinson. To find a Botox practitioner visit www.plasticsurgeons.co.za

Is it your eyesight?

■ Headaches that hit at the end of the day, or after a long period of reading or computer work, can be related to eyesight problems, as an imbalance in focus is misinterpreted by the brain as pain.

■ Make an optician's appointment – and get more sleep. 'For a clear image, your eyes need to focus together, but if you're tired they can diverge and this causes pain,' says Cape Town ophthalmologist Dr Michael Mesham.

Is it hormonal?

■ 'Menstrual migraines are headaches that hit any time around menses,' comments Dr Shevel. 'Interestingly, research shows that people who suffer from this type of migraine usually have normal hormone levels.'

■ This depends when your symptoms hit. If you get pain during your period, try taking a drug called Ponstan for five days before your period starts. If symptoms occur pre-period or during your Pill-free week, oestrogen supplements or taking the Pill continuously may help.

Is it caffeine withdrawal?

■ This can account for a throbbing head at the weekend and is most common in people who consume more than 275mg of caffeine a day in the week – the amount in a large espresso shot.

■ One cup of coffee should stop the pain in its tracks, but, in the future, try to keep your weekday and weekend caffeine intake equal. If you're trying to cut down, the homeopathic remedy coffee cruda can help reduce withdrawal symptoms.

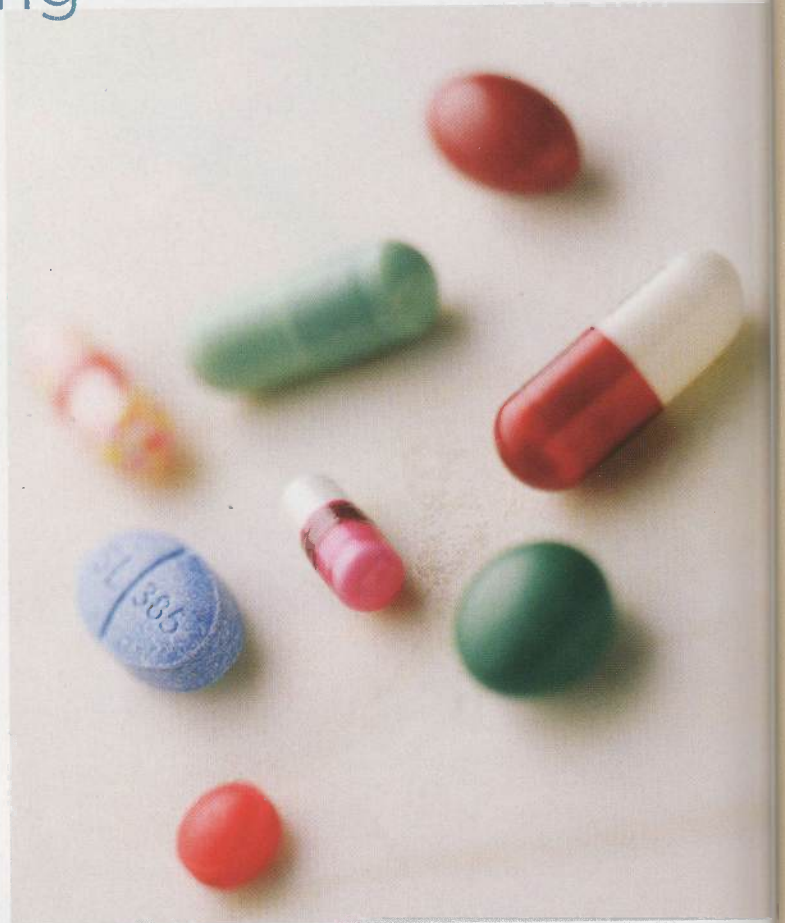
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MIGRAINES AND DIET

According to *Your Medical Questions Answered* (Reader's Digest), migraines are different from ordinary headaches in their intensity and duration, and in the fact that migraine sufferers seem to be predisposed to develop them in response to stress and other triggers. 'However, migraines do resemble common vascular headaches in that both types are caused by a widening of the cerebral arteries. The difference is that when a migraine sufferer is exposed to a triggering factor, the arteries leading to the brain first narrow, then widen, and this disturbs the flow of blood. In an ordinary vascular headache, the arteries don't narrow.'

Shevel explains that the consumption of particular foods can cause our blood vessels to dilate, and so create the early changes seen in migraine attacks. 'Processed meats containing high levels of nitrites (sodium nitrite in particular, which is used as a preservative and colour fixative) are considered predictable migraine triggers, as are foods that contain a significant amount of tyramine, such as aged cheeses, nuts, beans, yoghurt, bananas and citrus fruits. You also need to watch out for amines, which are common compounds found in a wide range of foods, including spinach, tomato, potato, small whole fish, tuna, liver, dark chocolate and alcohol.'

It's common knowledge that most food additives aren't good for our health, so it should come as no surprise that these have also been linked to migraine attacks. 'Monosodium glutamate (MSG) is probably the most well known of this group,' Shevel continues, 'and has been shown to cause cramps, diarrhoea and severe migraines. Aspartame, an artificial sweetener commonly used in diet drinks, has also been implicated. Even some spices, as well as garlic and onion, have been identified as possible triggers of migraine attacks.'



Painkillers will treat the symptoms of a headache, but not the cause.

'What's interesting to people working in this field is that diet may be an important contributing factor in some patients, but not others,' says Shevel, 'and the list of potential food triggers can be exhaustive.' If you believe foods may trigger your headache, expect to get a headache within 12 hours of eating the particular food item. Eliminating certain foods may be helpful for a minority of headache sufferers, but restricting a wide variety of foods on a long-term basis can be stressful and is rarely helpful.

Shevel goes on to say that dietary influences on a patient's headaches are much easier for the patient to determine than the doctor, but it's important to remember that diet is generally a trigger of the headache pain and not the underlying cause of it. 'With the correct treatment, patients can often enjoy all the foods, drinks and activities that were previously denied them,' he adds. ▀