



What's causing your headache?



Whether you're a martyr to migraines or just get the occasional blinder, finding out your trigger is the first step to a cure... By Karen Evennett

They're one of the most common health problems for women – you're three times more likely to get headaches than a man – but that doesn't mean you have to put up with them. Yes, painkillers can be a quick fix, but treat one headache too many in this way and your remedy could trigger another blast of pain or cause more health problems - too much paracetamol is linked to liver damage, while ibuprofen and aspirin may irritate your stomach.

What we all want is not to have to deal with the headache in the first place. No more snapping at your kids, cancelling friends or rushing home from work to lie in a darkened room. And that may not be as impossible as it sounds. Headaches have very typical triggers, and doing a bit of detective work could help identify – and treat – yours.

Start by keeping a diary for three months, recording not just the headaches but also your menstrual cycle, what you eat and drink, and the sort of day you've had. Triggers may turn out to be anything from PMS to the aspartame in your low-cal drink, or even the weather – headache risk leaps by 7.5 per cent for every 5°C increase in air temperature. Don't feel you have to wait until the end of three months before seeing your GP if your headache is impacting on your life but establishing a pattern may help your doctor prescribe the right treatment.

Your headache symptom checker

Do you drink a lot of coffee?

You could be experiencing caffeine withdrawal if your headaches are worse when your usual coffee habit is broken. The solution is simple – a strong cup of coffee. 'Some people with other types of headache – especially a tension-type headache – may also benefit from a strong cup of coffee, as caffeine constricts the blood vessels and this eases the pain,' says Professor Anne MacGregor, a Harley Street specialist in women's health and headaches. Going cold turkey often triggers with-





drawal headaches so, if you plan to go caffeine-free, try weaning yourself off it gradually – and don't treat a headache with any kind of caffeine remedy (coffee or painkillers containing it) once you've quit.

Do you rely on painkillers?

If you take them too often, this may be the cause of your pain. Taking ibuprofen, aspirin or paracetamol more than 15 days in a month, or codeine more than ten days, can cause medication overuse headache, says Dr Giles Elrington, medical director of the National Migraine Centre. 'Monitor pain relief carefully and, if your pain is not responding to painkillers within a day, or you're getting regular headaches, speak to a pharmacist or see your GP.'

Is the pain excruciating?

You could be suffering cluster headaches. Cluster headaches are so bad they're often dubbed suicide headaches, Professor MacGregor says. 'They're very rare – affecting about 1 in 1000 people – and are three times more common in men. Sufferers experience excruciatingly severe pain behind one eye, and can have up to six headaches a day, each one lasting a couple of hours, for anything from six weeks to 12 months. During a cluster period, the headaches can be triggered by alcohol, heat, exercise, strong-smelling substances (such as solvents), and even sex. You need specialist treatment, so ask your GP for a referral, and may be prescribed a calcium channel blocker (verapamil) normally used to treat high blood pressure. There's a risk the drug could make you light-headed, but it can bring about significant improvement.'

Has it come on explosively?

A pain that's new to you that goes from zero to unbearable in seconds is a medical emergency. Known as a thunderclap headache, this is one you should never ignore because, in one in ten cases, it's caused by a brain haemorrhage, says Dr Elrington. 'You must go straight to A&E.' The other time to take a headache seriously is if you have, or have had, a cancer that could have spread to the brain, he adds. 'For example, if you start getting a lot of headaches a few years after having had breast cancer, see your doctor within a week – especially if you've noticed any other problems such as weight loss or a personality change.'





Can Botox help?

Botox was discovered as a migraine treatment by accident when a surgeon's wrinkle patients reported fewer headaches. It's now approved by NICE for the treatment of chronic migraines (defined as at least 15 days of headache a month, of which at least eight are migraines) and is available from specialist migraine clinics.

If you have regular migraines you should be aware that a common cause of chronic migraine is medication overuse, says Professor MacGregor. 'Try not to treat headaches more than two or three days a week, as it can make them worse,' she says.

The top four headaches

Hormonal headaches

You get headaches around the time of your period or they've got worse in your forties. There are two main types of PMS headaches. 'A typical PMS headache starts mid-cycle, two weeks before your period, and is triggered by ovulation,' says Professor MacGregor. 'But it's also common to get one that starts about two days before your period and lasts about five days. It's an oestrogen withdrawal headache, caused by oestrogen levels dipping at this point in your cycle.'

Tension headaches

It feels like a tight band around your head. These affect eight out of ten of us and, though stress is an obvious trigger, dehydration, hunger and a stuffy atmosphere can also be to blame. 'The best solution is to remove the cause of your headache – eat or drink something, or get some fresh air. Taking away your worries isn't so easy, but doing these things can help your body to cope better with stress,' says Professor MacGregor.

Migraine

You suffer severe pain coupled with nausea. Triggers range from what you eat to how you feel emotionally and even what the weather is doing. Finding the best treatment for you may take trial and error, so get your GP on side for a referral to a specialist. 'Taking anti-sickness pills alongside painkillers can be really helpful. As well as treating the sickness, they help the painkillers to work more efficiently,' says Professor MacGregor.





Target your pain relief

Tension headaches

Drug treatment Aspirin and ibuprofen

Natural treatment Soak in a warm bath with a cup or two of Epsom salts

Hormonal headaches

Drug treatment Naproxen, or see your GP about the Pill or HRT

Natural treatment Migrastick (£5.99 from health stores) contains peppermint oil

Migraine

Drug treatment Triptans (eg Imigran) or your regular painkiller plus Motilium Instants for sickness

Natural treatment Feverfew and butterbur can reduce pain and frequency. Now Butterbur with Feverfew (£15.95 for 60, www.bigvits.co.uk)

Hot weather headache

Drug treatment – Paracetamol

Natural treatment - Cooling Head Ease Gel (£5.25, www.ethicalcommunity.com)

