

Handling students' exam-time headaches

HEADACHES have become an ordinary occurrence for students around exam times and many of them feel helpless when dealing with this problem.

Students are so overwhelmed by the pressure of assignments and exams that they completely forget about the effect this is having on their health.

Dr Elliot Shevel the chairman of the South African division of the International Headache Society has the following advice for students:

■ Be aware of your posture when studying as this can result in a tension headache. Use a good chair that supports your back and that gives the ideal posture. Visit www.headacheclinic.co.za to get a free copy of the Ideal Computer Posture. Learn the right stretching exercises to stretch the muscles of your head, face, neck and jaw. Stretching should be gentle and soothing, not agonizingly painful. Stretch your neck and jaw muscles carefully and you will get results.

■ Finding out what triggers your headaches by keeping a diary. Each time you suffer from a headache, make a note about the warning signs, triggers and severity. If you can discover some of your personal triggers, you may be able to avoid future headaches. This diary is important as it will give your medical professional an accurate history of your headaches. It will assist with diagnosing conditions such as Medication-Overuse-Headache (MOH) and help you make a decision to go for no-drug methods of treatment. A Migraine diary is available free of



charge at www.headacheclinic.co.za under Free Assistance.

■ Dietary migraine is a common affliction. These are usually triggered by foods that assist with energy such as chocolate. Chocolate raises the blood sugar levels quickly and then allows it to drop quickly again. Low GI (Glycaemic Index) foods give a more even blood sugar level. Use the nutritional facts label to help choose healthy foods when shopping. Compare nutrient levels for similar foods. Common culprits in-

clude MSG, red wine, cheese, soy sauce and processed meats. Re-member skipping meals is a sure-fire trigger for migraines as well. Eat in moderation and enjoy your meals. A dietary trigger diary is available on www.headacheclinic.co.za under Free Assistance.

■ Beware of Medication-Overuse-Headache (MOH). Medication is only appropriate for someone who suffers a few times a month. According to the International Headache Society, if you are taking medication more than

twice a week you are at risk of developing MOH. This means that the drugs you are taking will cause the migraine to become more severe and more frequent over time. This leads to a downward spiral into constant medication overuse and constant pain. The more medication you take, the more pain you are in, the more medication you need and the cycle continues.

■ It is important that you keep your stress levels to a minimum. Plan ahead to guarantee that you

have enough time to study and that you get sufficient rest each night.

■ Dehydration is a common trigger, adequate intake of fluid throughout the day to prevent headaches. The human brain is more than 75% water, and it is very sensitive to the amount of water available to it. When the brain detects that the water supply is too low, it begins to produce histamines. This is essentially a process of water rationing and conservation, in order to safeguard the brain in case the water shortage continues for a long period of time. The histamines directly cause pain and fatigue, in other words a headache and the low energy that usually accompanies it. It is best to drink plain water, as many carbonated soft drinks contain substances that can also trigger headaches. Substances that headache sufferers should avoid include common ingredients in soft drinks such as caffeine.

■ A recent study, published in the Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine, tested 32 women with tension-type headaches. The investigators studied self-report data on headache triggers, pain interference with sleep, and self-management strategies for pain. 81% reported that going to sleep was the most frequently used self-management strategy, and this group also rated going to sleep as the most effective strategy. So don't lose out on sleep. Fatigue is a major trigger of headaches as well, aim to sleep seven or eight hours a night.