

**Y**OU'VE probably had one at least once in your life – that searing, throbbing pain that makes you fear your head will explode. But did you know that up to one in five employees in South Africa suffers

from such bad headaches they are unable to do their jobs effectively?

According to headache specialist Dr Elliot Shevel of The Headache Clinic in Johannesburg, there are no official statistics on how much productivity is lost due to headaches.

But he estimates it probably costs the country millions or even billions of rands. "Few people will skip work because of a headache so it's hard to tell how much productivity is lost. Most headache and migraine sufferers go to work and try to soldier on, regardless of their pain," he says.

Worse, more than 70 per cent of severe sufferers have relationship problems at home and work. They also tend to be more depressed and suffer from loss of short-term memory, which stops them from being productive.

About 20 per cent of the world's population suffers from chronic and debilitating headaches, and even though they are so common, many people suffer in silence because they are scared their bosses and co-workers will not care.

### Who gets headaches?

Adult women get headaches four times more often than men do and these are linked to changes in hormones. In both men and women, the severity of the headaches and how often they occur decline as people get older. Children get headaches too, some well before the age of 10.

### What causes headaches?

The most common cause of headaches is muscle contractions of the scalp and neck. These tension headaches affect 20 per cent of people and are usually linked to stress or anxiety. The other large group of headaches are known as vascular headaches, consisting of migraine and cluster headaches, affecting five to 10 per cent of people. It is possible to

# Soothe your aching head

have tension and vascular headaches at the same time and it can be difficult to distinguish between them as there can be symptoms of both. Other causes can be infection such as of the sinus, tonsillitis, toothache or meningitis, as well as fairly serious conditions such as concussion, strokes, brain tumours, kidney failure and high or low blood sugar.

Headaches can be brought on by things you do or conditions around you. These include medication, eating or drinking iced food and fluids, not eating enough, drinking too much alcohol or caffeine, exposure to certain chemicals or high altitudes, such as in a plane.

Certain foodstuffs and beverages trigger headaches in some people. The most common triggers include coffee, chocolates, yellow cheese, other dairy products, red meat, nuts, vegetable extracts, food high in monosodium glutamate and alcohol, but different people respond to food or drinks in different ways.

### Types of headaches

#### Cluster headaches

More men than women suffer from cluster headaches, and the pain can be so bad it has been called the "suicide" headache. Affecting people between the ages of 20 to 40, the intense

Don't suffer in silence – the pain can be controlled if you know how



# the headaches that take over your life

headaches often happen at the same time every day or every few days. They stop you from functioning normally but usually don't last longer than 90 minutes. They often affect heavy smokers or drinkers and usually begin as a minor pain around one eye and eventually spread to that entire side of the face. The pain can spread to the teeth, forehead or cheek. Towards the end of the headache, there may be short peaks of pain before the headache goes away. Other symptoms can show up on the same side of the face as the headache – these can include a blocked nose, red eyes from tears, a widened blood vessel, a droopy eyelid, small pupil and a red face.

Frequently, the pain wakes you up one to two hours after going to sleep. They are not stress-related and there are no clear answers as to what causes them. People with cluster headaches find it difficult to keep still and could even start doing intense physical activity, as lying down makes the pain worse. After an attack a person feels extremely tired.

## Tension headaches

These are the most common headaches in adults and teens and are not a serious risk to your health. The dull, aching, pressure often develops after a stressful day at work or school or during times of emotional difficulty – particularly when you are overtired, rushed and anxious. It often feels as if your head is clamped in a vice or there is a tight band around your head. The pain is usually on both sides of your head as well as in your neck and can last from an hour to a full day or even more. They are more common in “uptight” people with “uptight” muscles and are often linked to anxiety, depression, family or work problems, lack of sleep, excessive glare from the sun or lights, or even from straining your neck from chewing gum. They can also be caused by eyestrain or from sitting for long periods in one position such as at a computer

or behind a steering wheel. The headache is usually

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**‘Most sufferers go to work and try to soldier on despite the pain’**

worse towards the end of the day.

You could also experience stiffness in your neck, upper back or shoulder muscles, tiredness, dizziness, sensitivity to light or sound, nausea and depression. There could also be palpitations and sweating. Many people have occasional tension-type headaches (less than 15 per month). If you have 15 or more headaches per month for at least six months, you have a chronic tension-type headache problem.

## Migraines

These are very severe headaches that generally affect more women than men. You can tell the difference between a headache and a migraine because before and during a migraine you could see flashing lights, colour distortion and halos. You would also feel nauseous. Migraines are such a complex issue on their own DRUM will be investigating them in depth in next week's issue.

## Headache relief

Headaches are uncomfortable and sometimes stop you from working but they are mostly not dangerous. Lifestyle can play an important part in preventing them and if you don't smoke, don't drink a lot of alcohol, get regular sleep, eat a healthy diet and exercise daily, you are unlikely to suffer from many headaches unless you have a medical problem. Stress is one of the most common triggers so try to prevent it.

## Cluster headaches

Cluster headaches can be difficult to treat as they don't respond well to medication. The best thing is to try and focus on the end of the attack. You could find that pacing the floor or rocking in a chair provides temporary relief. Try to keep a regular sleep schedule because changes in normal sleep patterns (such as taking afternoon naps) could be a trigger. During a cluster period, headaches often develop when you relax after a stressful time, so reducing stress may help avoid them.

## Tension headaches

Many tension headaches can be cured by over-the-counter headache medication and by lying down in a quiet, dark room. Be careful with the medication though – if you go over

## Fast facts

- The ancient Greeks and Romans used peppermint tea to treat their headaches. They also drank infusions made from camomile, rosemary and lavender, or applied raw potato, cabbage and onion to the head in an effort to relieve headaches.
- Hundreds of years ago headaches were thought to be the work of evil spirits and rituals were performed to drive them off. Sometimes circular chunks of the skull were removed in order to let the spirits escape.

the recommended dose, the tablets themselves could become the cause of your headaches. Simple relaxation techniques may also help such as a hot bath with lavender oil in the water, camomile tea or breathing exercises or meditation. Even lying down in a room with dim lighting can be enormously helpful. You can also apply heat to the painful area with a hot water bottle and have someone gently massage your neck and shoulders or give yourself a massage. Take a break from whatever is causing a tension headache. Take a five-minute walk or find a place to lie down and take deep breaths. If you're suffering from a babelaas headache, drink lots of water or tea – don't drink soda or coffee as these will make you more dehydrated.

## When to seek help

Seek professional help when headaches happen extremely often, are so bad you can't function properly, they happen after you have been hit on the head or there are symptoms such as vomiting, dizziness or changes in your eyesight. You should have a physical examination and your nervous system should be checked for clues to the causes.

You may be asked to keep a “headache diary” to determine the events leading up to the headache which could be linked to its cause. Tests such as MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) or a CT scan (computerised tomography scan) may be needed if your doctor suspects there is an aneurysm (swollen blood vessel in the brain) or brain tumour (although these are quite rare).

If the headache is caused by poor posture, a chiropractor (specialist working with the spine) could help with treatment.

Headaches can be managed. But you need to identify and understand the type you suffer from, and must then act accordingly. □

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