

I thought I just had a migraine, but I nearly died!



When Rebecca Foster found herself with a shattering headache, she never expected it would become a medical emergency

"I was watching TV with my three-year-old son, Jack, when I got a headache. I'm prone to migraines, and thought that's what it was. I took a couple of paracetamol and waited for it to pass. But it didn't, and I began to feel sick and shaky. The pain became so intense I had to get Jack to bring me wet tea towels to put across my forehead.

"The pain suddenly moved to my back and my neck became stiff. I phoned my mom to come and look after Jack, and I tried to rest on the couch. Later, I began to projectile vomit and the night passed in complete agony. By the morning I was worse – my vision was blurred and the light was bothering me. My mom decided to phone the hospital for advice. They suspected meningitis and said it was vital I got to hospital quickly. That's when I really started to panic.

"I was taken to the hospital and had a head scan, which looked okay, and then a lumbar puncture, which draws spinal fluid from the lower back. They discovered the spinal fluid had blood in it, and the doctor told me I had to be transferred to another hospital. By this time I was screaming in pain and totally hysterical. I was convinced I was about to die and would not see my son again.

"At the other hospital, they carried out more tests. When the doctor came back

with the results, I could tell by the look on his face it was bad news. He said I'd had a subarachnoid haemorrhage and needed emergency surgery. Without it, I would die; with it, I had a 50 percent chance of survival, although there was a risk of a stroke or being left epileptic. I was shaking and crying and couldn't take it in – I was in complete fear for my life.

"That night, I was stabilised and sedated, and by the time I knew what was going on, it was the next afternoon and I'd had my op. They had sealed off part of my brain with metal coils to stop the blood. The pain was still quite bad, but I was out of immediate danger. I spent two weeks in hospital, and then went to stay with my parents.

"No-one knows what caused the problem. It's been a year now and my son and I are back in our own home. Generally I'm fit and well, but I do take medication for the pain.

"Nothing could ever have prepared me for being so ill, or how I feel about it now. I'll never get over the fact that I was just minutes from death and so close to never seeing my son again."

IS IT A HEADACHE – OR SOMETHING MORE SINISTER?

- Most people get tension headaches at some point, which generally respond to over-the-counter medication and disappear quickly. You should consult your GP if it lasts longer than 24 hours and hasn't responded to painkillers. If you also have blurred vision, vomiting and sleepiness, see your GP straightaway, or call 10111 if you have additional symptoms, such as a stiff neck, sensitivity to light, confusion or fitting.
- Subarachnoid haemorrhages are often a result of defects you're born with, but may be down to ageing or high blood pressure.
- If you suffer from migraines, call the Amayeza Migraine Patient Organisation on 0860 678 268, or the Headache Clinic on (011) 484 0933.

DOC'S VIEW

Neurosurgeon David Sandeman says: "The key to the diagnosis of subarachnoid haemorrhage is the suddenness of the onset of the headache. Treatment involves passing tiny coils of wire into the aneurysm via a catheter, avoiding major surgery."