

PREMENSTRUAL HEADACHES

Is a pounding headache the first sign that your period is on its way?
Here's what our experts suggest

Premenstrual headaches and migraines usually begin a few days before the onset of menstruation and may last up to five days. These headaches, say our experts, are related to changes in hormone levels and usually indicate that the body is responding in an abnormal way to the normal hormone fluctuations that occur during the menstrual cycle. Before menstruation, the levels of oestrogen and progesterone drop to very low levels and somehow trigger the headache. The exact mechanism is unknown, but may be related to fluid retention, increased stress, or reduced levels of magnesium.

Do you have a question for our panel of experts? E-mail longevity@jpl.co.za or write to Longevity, PO Box 1741, Saxonwold, 2132

THE NATUROPATH

"Liver imbalances can often lead to headaches and migraines, which is why cutting out junk food and other liver stressors such as smoking, coffee and excessive animal fats is important. Liver tonics such as dandelion root can be taken in the form of a warm coffee-substituting drink; or should your liver be particularly sensitive, a specific liver cleansing programme may be recommended (it's best to embark on these only under the supervision of your healthcare practitioner).

"If you suffer from hormonal imbalances in general, you may find that any weaknesses and/or discomforts are exaggerated before or during your period. Also, if you suffer from neck and shoulder tension or stress in general, any hormone imbalance or related body stressor may trigger an exaggeration of that condition. Invest in some good back care (massage or physiotherapy), maintain good endocrine health with vitamin E and phytoestrogens, eat whole foods and avoid the excessive intake of chemical and/or processed foods."

– Dr Eva Mihal-Bazzea, Cape Town

THE HOMOEOPATH

"Treatment would be based on what the pain feels like, what makes it better or worse, and whether there are any other PMS symptoms accompanying the headaches. Medicines that are considered specific for the treatment of PMS include *Calcarea carbonica*, *Pulsatilla pratensis*, *Natrum muriaticum*, *Lycopodium clavatum* and *Nux vomica*. These medicines can be tried individually or in combination – 6CH strength, three times daily when needed.

"Supplements that could be helpful are Evening Primrose oil, 1 000mg three times per day; magnesium in combination with vitamin B6, as directed; DL-phenylalanine, 500mg three times a day on an empty stomach; and L-tyrosine, 500mg twice daily on an empty stomach. Herbs that may help are feverfew and cayenne pepper, as directed (both of these should not be taken if you are using blood thinning medication). *Agnus castus* can be used to balance your hormones; however it is a slow working herb and needs to be used continuously for six months."

– Dr Shaun Hutchinson, Boksburg

THE HEADACHE EXPERT

"The best approach is to diagnose why your body is reacting abnormally to your normal hormone fluctuations and focus on prevention. The change in hormone levels is only a trigger, not the underlying cause of the pain, even if you never get a headache at any other time.

"Treatment should first be directed at reducing muscle tension in the head and neck and sensitivity to the arteries of the scalp. An intra-oral appliance called a Posture Modifying Appliance (PMA) works well, as does physiotherapy and gentle massage. Magnesium supplements (in chelated form for enhanced absorption) and maintaining a healthy lifestyle also helps. If you are taking an oral contraceptive, try changing it as the differing amounts of hormones have different side effects.

"As a last resort, preventative medication can be taken before the pain occurs. These include a skin patch containing oestrogen, anti-inflammatory drugs and antidepressants."

– Dr Elliot Shevel, medical director, The Headache Clinic, Johannesburg