

**T**HE weather's warm, you've been relaxing and have had a break from the stress of work. So why are you getting more headaches than usual? You may be a summer headache sufferer.

For most people summer is a time of braais and lazy afternoons in the sun but for many headache and migraine sufferers it's a season of pain and misery, says Dr Elliot Shevel, founder and chairman of the South African Headache Society and medical director of The Headache Clinic. The good news is you can control summer headaches by taking sensible precautions.

## Summer headache triggers

Heat combined with seasonal changes in the type of pollen found in the air can trigger headaches and migraines in summer. Here are the main summer headache triggers and how to deal with them.

### Trigger 1: Summer sun

"Many people get headaches or migraines after spending time in the sun without the protection of a hat or sunshade," Dr Shevel says.

## FAST FACTS

- The ancient Greeks and Romans used peppermint tea to treat headaches. They also drank tea infusions made from camomile, rosemary and lavender and applied raw potato, cabbage and onion to the head in attempts to relieve pain.
- 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.
- One in five employees in South Africa suffers from such bad headaches they're unable to do their jobs effectively.
- About 20 per cent of the world's population suffer from chronic and debilitating headaches.

CORBIS GREATSTOCK

# OH, MY SPLITTING head!

Do you suffer from summer headaches? Here's how to recognise – and beat – them

## ALL ABOUT ...

### TENSION HEADACHES

THIS is the most common headache in adults and teens and is not a serious risk to your health. It's experienced as a dull, aching pressure and often develops after a stressful day at work or school, particularly when you're overtired, rushed or anxious.

The pain is usually on both sides of your head and your neck. These headaches can last from an hour to a day or even a few days.

They can also be caused by eyestrain or from sitting for long periods in one position, at a computer or behind a steering wheel for example. You may also feel stiffness in your neck, upper back or shoulder muscles, tiredness, dizziness, sensitivity to light or sound, nausea and depression. Tension headaches are usually worse towards the end of the day.

#### Treatment

Over-the-counter headache medications work quite well but be careful – if you take more than the recommended dose the tablets themselves could become the cause of headaches.

A few simple relaxation techniques may help to alleviate the pain, such as lying down with your eyes closed in a darkened room, sipping camomile tea, doing basic breathing exercises or meditating.

You can also apply heat to the painful area or have someone gently massage your neck and shoulder muscles. Try to take a break from whatever is causing the tension headache.

### CLUSTER HEADACHES

THIS intense headache often occurs at the same time every day or every few days and can prevent you functioning normally. It usually doesn't last longer than 90 minutes.

It usually affects people between the ages of 20 and 40, is more common in men than women and often affects heavy smokers or drinkers.

It usually begins as a minor pain around one eye that spreads across the side of the face. The pain can spread to the teeth, forehead or cheek. As it tapers off there may be short peaks of pain over a few minutes before the headache goes away. Other symptoms can show up on the same side of the face as the headache. These include a blocked nose, red eyes, a widened blood vessel, a droopy eyelid, a small pupil and a red face.

These headaches 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 sufferers feel extremely tired.

#### Treatment

Cluster headaches can be difficult to treat as they don't respond well to medication. The best thing is to try to focus on the end of the attack. You could find temporary relief pacing the floor or rocking in a chair. If you're a frequent sufferer try to stick to a regular sleep schedule because changes in your normal sleep pattern (such as taking afternoon naps) seem to trigger cluster headaches. Cluster headaches often occur when you relax after a stressful time so reducing stress may help.

### MIGRAINES

THIS is an extremely severe headache that generally seems to affect women more than men.

A migraine is different to other headaches – before and during an attack you could see flashing lights, colour distortions and halos. You're also likely to feel nauseous.

The key to preventing migraines is to identify what causes them. Different people have different triggers.

#### Treatment

Although migraines can't be totally cured there are medicines to treat them and to prevent attacks.

Sometimes a mild painkiller such as paracetamol or aspirin can relieve the pain but sufferers of severe migraines often need something stronger.

"When the body temperature rises as a result of being in the sun or from exercise the small blood vessels in the skin dilate to allow the body to lose heat.

"This heat regulation system may also play a part in the dilation of the scalp arteries. These blood vessels are known to be a source of headache or migraine pain for many people."

The solution is to stay out of direct sunlight as far as possible and always wear a hat outdoors.

#### Trigger 2: Dehydration

Dehydration is known to trigger headaches so be sure to drink plenty of fluids so your body is properly hydrated.

"It's best to drink plain water as many fizzy drinks contain substances such as caffeine and aspartame that can also trigger headaches," Dr Shevel says.

#### Trigger 3: Bright light

Many headache and migraine sufferers are sensitive to bright light and avoid it when they already have a headache.

But bright light can also trigger a headache. Dr Shevel advises wearing sunglasses for protection, preferably with polarised lenses to eliminate glare.

#### Trigger 4: Seasonal change

A change in seasons also brings changes in the type of pollen in the air which may cause headaches in some people or cause hayfever with headaches and sinus congestion as secondary conditions.

This trigger is difficult to control so you may simply have to treat the symptoms.

#### What are ice cream headaches?

Ice cream headaches are triggered by swallowing cold food and drinks.

In hot weather it's hard to say no to cold drinks and ice cream but you can take smaller and slower mouthfuls so the substance can warm up in your mouth before you swallow.

You can make an ice-cream headache go away faster by

pressing your tongue against the palate of your mouth.

#### What causes headaches?

Although summer headaches are often brought on by environmental conditions the most common cause is muscle contractions of the scalp and neck. Called tension headaches they affect 20 per cent of the population and are usually linked to stress or anxiety.

The other major group of headaches are known as vascular headaches. These include migraine and cluster headaches and affect 5 to 10 per cent of the population. It's possible to have tension and vascular headaches – and experience their symptoms – at the same time.

Other causes of headaches can be infections such as sinus infections, tonsillitis, toothache or meningitis; and serious conditions such as concussion, stroke, brain tumour, kidney failure and high or low blood sugar.

Sometimes headaches are brought on lifestyle choices

such as not eating enough, drinking too much alcohol or caffeine, taking certain medications, breathing in smoke or fumes from chemicals, or exposure to certain chemicals or high altitude (such as when flying).

The most common dietary triggers are coffee, chocolate, yellow cheese, other dairy products, red meat, nuts, vegetable extracts, foods high in monosodium glutamate and alcohol.

#### When to seek help

Summer headaches should subside if you take the necessary precautions. If they persist you should visit your doctor for a check-up. See the box above to find out what type of headache you might be getting.

You should seek professional help if your headaches occur often, if they're so bad you can't work or perform other activities properly, if they occur after you were hit on the head, or if there are other symptoms such as vomiting, dizziness or changes to your eyesight. □

COURTESY HEALTH24.COM