

HEALING my headache



For more than fifteen years, Thalita and Charmaine have lived with debilitating migraines, but through traditional or alternative therapies they do more than just survive – they live life fully again!

Finding the balance

'The first time I had a migraine, I was 23 and my son Jay-Jay was around three-months-old. I woke in the night with such a bad headache that I had to be rushed to the hospital. The doctor thought it was an acute case of sinusitis. I knew it wasn't though,' explains Thalita Harvey, 39.

So began Thalita's rollercoaster ride with migraines. Over the years they became progressively worse and Jonathan, her husband, would rush her to casualty sometimes twice a week.

'The doctors at the hospital injected me with a cocktail of medicines, until we found a formula that worked,' she explains.

Thalita has been for CAT scans and consulted an array of doctors. She was even prescribed epilepsy medication, which made no difference at all. She tried food elimination diets, and says 'You discover over time which foods can send you over the edge. Stress can also be a trigger, but I've now learnt ways to relax myself'.

Thalita takes preventative medicine, Sandomigraine, every evening. 'It's not a painkiller but helps regulate the arteries in the head. If I feel a migraine coming on, I take a painkiller like ibuprofen, which usually works.'

If that doesn't kill the headache, Thalita will take the prescription rescue medicine. 'I only take it when it's absolutely necessary as I can only take two tablets in 48 hours. If that doesn't work, I need to go to hospital and that's what I try to avoid. Thankfully, I haven't had to use it for a year because I haven't had a severe migraine.'

For Thalita, it has been a long journey to find a balance. 'I was scared that my migraines were more a medication-dependent headache than a real migraine. But now, I feel I have the migraines under control as well as the amount of medication I take. I've heard that in some people, their migraines disappear altogether in their 40s. So there's hope!' says Thalita with a smile.



No more medication

'My headaches became more severe in my early 20s,' says Charmaine. 'A dull headache all the time often made me feel irritated.' But for Charmaine the road would be long and arduous before she found the underlying cause



for her migraines.

Working as a financial administrator and trying to cope with dull headaches all day, proved to be draining for Charmaine.

'My GP referred me to a neurologist who sent me for an MRI scan,' explains Charmaine. Although nothing out of the ordinary appeared on the scan, Charmaine's migraines went on unabated. 'Then eight years ago I really wasn't feeling well and was vomiting and suffering from nausea caused by the migraines.'

Another neurologist and another scan revealed Charmaine needed an angiogram. After this procedure the surgeon said everything was fine but the migraines persisted. A further two neurosurgeons suggested epilepsy medication. 'I started picking up weight,' says Charmaine, 'so my medication was changed and this left me unable to eat! I was also concerned as my 10-year-old was on the same medication for headaches. But we were still not headache-free.' After seeing an advert for the Headache Clinic, Charmaine booked an appointment for herself and her son. A neurologist examined them thoroughly and after a session of X-rays and physio, they were informed that the headaches were caused through muscle tension in the jaw. 'When the nurse pressed on my jaw line, I thought I was going to scream;

she knew exactly where the pain would be. A dentist then made a mould of our mouths and a few days later we had a device like a dental plate fitted. The clinic was the first to accurately diagnose the cause of our headaches.'

Two months on, and neither Charmaine nor her son have experienced a migraine or battled those dull headaches. They no longer take preventative or epilepsy medication. 'I'm still amazed that this little plate has solved our problems,' says Charmaine. 'My 17 years of headaches are finally over!'

Did you know?

Approximately 75% of headaches are tension headaches. Our stress-filled days, bad posture at the computer and hours spent in the traffic contribute to a tightening of the muscles in the neck and head and hence, the painful headache.

Finding the underlying causes and triggers

Whether chocolate, citrus fruits, or your hormones trigger your headache, Dr Shevel reminds us that there is a distinction between the underlying cause and the triggers. 'Most people think that the triggers are the most important factors. In fact, your body is acting abnormally to the triggering factor.' Stress may be your trigger but it is not the cause of your pain. You may have a tendency to tense up and when you're feeling stressed, your muscles spasm and cause the headache. By treating the spasms correctly, you could function in stressful situations without creating spasms, thus preventing headaches. If you experience frequent headaches or pain that lasts more than 24 hours, visit your doctor to rule out any life-threatening illnesses. Fortunately these types of secondary headaches

Is it a headache or a migraine?

'Theoretically,' explains Dr Shevel, Medical Director of The Headache Clinic, 'someone who has a vascular headache – pain from the arteries in the head – has a migraine, and someone with muscular pain – pain from the muscles in the head and neck – has a tension headache. But in reality, most headache sufferers have a combination of vascular and muscular pain.'

'Nausea, light sensitivity, sound sensitivity, et cetera are

similar symptoms in migraine and headache sufferers,' says Dr Shevel, 'but the intensity of the pain is much worse and more frequent for a migraine.' While a tension headache may occur daily as a constant pain over the head or behind the eyes and be accompanied by a stiff neck, a migraine is described as a one-sided throbbing pain, with nausea and vomiting, often aggravated by bright lights and loud noises.'

aren't common and most people suffer from a primary headache – one that isn't disease- or illness-related.

Medication overuse headache

Did you know that regularly taking medication for a headache can actually cause a headache, also known as an Analgesic Rebound headache? 'Your body produces less and

less of its own natural pain-killing substances. So the headaches become worse and more frequent,' explains Dr Shevel. It becomes a dangerous cycle of pain and substance abuse – trying to delay taking or not taking the medication results in a worse headache, similar to withdrawal symptoms.

Faith in physio

As most headaches can be traced to tension in the head and neck muscles, Sandra, a registered physiotherapist says the following may suggest that your headaches originate from your neck:

- Headache is associated with neck pain. Does the pain radiate from the back to the front of the head?
- Headache is accompanied by dizziness or light-headedness.
- Headaches are brought on or made worse by neck movement or staying in the same position for a long time.
- Headache always feels worse on

the same side of your head.

■ Headache is often eased by applying pressure to the base of the skull.

Physiotherapists use a wide range of techniques to treat headaches, like joint mobilisation or manipulation, massage or trigger point release and advice on exercises to stretch tight structures and strengthen weak ones. Some physios can perform dry needling and/or acupuncture.

A multidisciplinary approach

A drug-free treatment may seem a scary prospect, but for Charmaine Weare, it ended a 17-year cycle of pain. The Headache Clinic offers a multidisciplinary assessment. Their neurologist will examine you to exclude serious problems like tumours, bleeding on the brain, malaria, etc. Dr Shevel explains, 'No single specialist can have the knowledge necessary to make a comprehensive assessment and diagnosis. For this reason, the Clinic integrates the expertise of different specialists.'

The Headache Clinic, national number for consultations is 0861 678 911 or visit www.headacheclinic.co.za For a list of physiotherapists in your area contact (011) 485 1467 or visit www.physiosa.org.za

Feature: Gill Paizes Photos: Masterfile, Emarie Knapton