

How to treat or prevent festive headaches

Migraines are a real threat and for some, the holidays are a painful time of year

No one wants the festive season to end up being nothing but a big headache, but we all know that's a real threat thanks to overcrowded and noisy malls, rich food and summer heat.

And apparently, for many migraine and headache sufferers, the December holiday season is one of the most painful and difficult times of the year.

Headache expert and maxillo-facial and oral surgeon Dr Elliot Shevel has some good news, however, saying that there are steps that can be taken to prevent or treat problems.

The combination of summer heat, rich food, stress and noise, he says, triggers



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headaches for many patients. "It is important that migraine patients, and those who live and work with the pain, understand that migraine pain is a real neurological disease that can be treated following proper diagnosis," he says.

The South African Medical Journal recently published a groundbreaking paper by Shevel, also the chairman of the South African Headache Society,

which sheds new light on understanding the factors that make migraines and headaches a category on their own.

So what exactly constitutes a migraine? The symptoms include throbbing head pain, nausea and sensitivity to noise and light. An attack can last between four and 72 hours, and migraines are also hereditary, and three times more prevalent among women than men.

Other than the noise factor of the festive season, it's that time to eat, drink and be merry. But Shevel says headache and migraine sufferers are "strongly advised" to watch what they eat and drink at Christmas and New Year's parties, and other celebratory functions.

Ingredients and food such as caffeine, sugar, MSG, processed meats and cheeses, and chocolate are known to trigger migraines and headaches.

More advice is that during summer those with headache problems should take in plenty of fluids because dehydration is yet another important trigger.

"It is best to drink plain water as many carbonated soft drinks contain substances that can also trigger headaches,"

Shevel says, adding that ingredients in soft drinks to watch out for include caffeine and aspartame.

Alcohol, too, is a problem area because excessive amounts lead to dehydration, so sufferers should cut down and ensure they drink plenty of water during and following an indulgence session.

Too much partying until the early hours may also mean that headache patients don't get enough sleep – yet another major trigger.

While we've seen a lot of unseasonal rain in Cape Town in recent weeks, the reality is that summer holidays bring seasonal changes in the weather – and types of pollen which can trigger headaches.

Shevel suggests a routine of healthy living is necessary – even during the festive season – if you're looking for the best prescription. "A healthy diet with regular and well-balanced meals and adequate sleep (eight to 10 hours a day) can often work wonders for a headache-prone person," he says.

And don't spend time in the sun without the protection of a hat or sunshade.

Shevel has co-authored a paper published in several international medical journals which details the mechanism by which the small arteries of the scalp are known to be the source of migraine pain for many. "It is possible that summer heat triggers migraines by causing these arteries to dilate," he warns.

And wear your sunglasses to cut out glare, because most sufferers are light-sensitive too.

Shevel advises that you shouldn't expect self-help to get rid of migraines or other very bad headaches.

"People who neglect to have them treated open themselves up to more