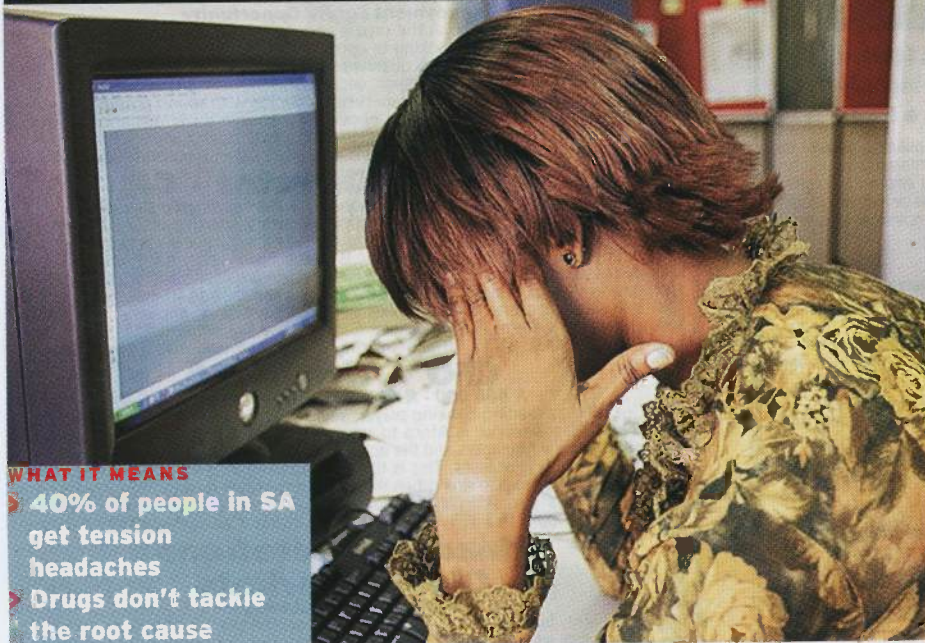


# Hard to bear

**Agony** Overusing drugs can be harmful



**WHAT IT MEANS**

- ▶ 40% of people in SA get tension headaches
- ▶ Drugs don't tackle the root cause

## Besides stress and bad lifestyle habits, headaches can be hereditary

**Headaches are the most** common ailment in the world. According to a recent study by The Nielsen Company, about 42% of participants in a global health online survey involving 47 countries — SA included — reported to have had a headache in the previous four weeks.

Though stress, bad eating and lifestyle habits such as excessive drinking and smoking, lack of sufficient exercise and sleep are some of the most common causes of headaches, in some instances, the problem is hereditary.

"Headaches, especially migraines, are often just the tip of the iceberg of what is wrong," says Dr Florrie Kerschbaumer, a Cape Town-based homeopath.

"In some cases food is the trigger and in others it is stress. What happens under certain stresses is that the body becomes toxic.

"When it tenses, everything tenses up

and so do blood vessels, which means less oxygen going to the brain, leading to a cramp in the brain. So a migraine is like a body's cry for help."

For some people a nap relieves a headache, but for many chronic sufferers the solution is not as simple and regardless of the assortment of drugs they take, the headaches keep recurring.

This is because drugs don't tackle the root cause of the problem, says Dr Elliot Shevel, medical director at the Headache Clinic in Johannesburg.

He says causes of headaches differ from one individual to another. Often, people resort to over-the-counter medication to deal with them. However, that not only provides temporary relief, but overuse of painkillers can cause what is called rebound headaches.

This is because in the long run, dependence on painkillers affects the body's

ability to release endorphins — the body's natural painkillers, also known as "feel good" hormones.

In SA, and globally, tension headaches are the most common type. They affect 40% of South Africans and occur as a result of tension in the head, neck and jaw muscles. Lack of sufficient sleep or prolonged poor posture and anxiety are among the contributing factors.

"Most people are unaware that even when they are asleep, they are tense. Some people even grind their teeth in their sleep," says Shevel.

Also common is the migraine headache, which is often more severe than the tension headache. This type is prevalent among women, affecting 18% of the population as opposed to only 6% of men. Shevel says this is attributed to a change in hormones, especially during the menstrual period. Though it is believed that chocolate is the common trigger of migraines in women, Shevel says that is not true.

"Even more common," says Shevel, "is the combination of the tension headache and a migraine headache."

However, cluster headaches are reportedly the most severe of all types. Women sufferers describe them as worse than labour pains. These affect men more than women, especially smokers.

"But what is interesting is that even when they stop smoking, the headaches don't go away," says Shevel.

Referred to as suicide headaches as well — as numbers of sufferers have said they often feel like hitting their heads against the wall to make the pain stop — cluster headaches affect about 1% of the population. Sufferers often wake up at night with an intense burning pain in or around the eye, resulting in it being teary or bloodshot. The pain can last for a couple of hours.

□ *Some of the useful sources of information on headaches and treatment include [www.headclin.co.za](http://www.headclin.co.za); the Headache Clinic on 0861-678-911; and the Rondebosch Homeopath Centre on (021) 689-5758.*

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