

WELLBEING

Heads Up

When it comes to headaches and migraines, sometimes painkillers can be part of the problem. Here's how to stay on top of the treatment options

More than ten million people in the UK regularly suffer from headaches, a condition that accounts for about 1 in 25 of all GP consultations. And it is estimated that a further eight million Brits suffer from debilitating migraines, with 25 million work or school days lost to the illness each year.

But if you automatically reach for a painkiller to treat the problem, you might be doing yourself more harm than good. According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), up to a million people in the UK suffer from "completely preventable" disabling headaches caused by taking too many headache painkillers.

They are such a common problem that they have been given their own name – medication overuse headaches – and they are listed alongside tension headaches, cluster headaches, and migraines as together being accountable for 95 per cent of all headaches suffered.

People who take pain-relieving medicines for ten to 15 days a month, and over a period of three months, are most at risk from the daily pain that medication overuse headaches cause. And it's a vicious cycle. The sufferer's pain gets increasingly worse, so they take more medication, which only adds to the problem.

An important first step to avoiding overuse

of painkillers is to determine whether you are suffering from headaches or migraines, and from there, work out if there are better treatments. Consultant neurologist Dr Nicholas Silver explains: "Migraine attacks can be incredibly debilitating, rendering people unable to work and carry on with their daily routine. Migraines are more than 'just a headache' and may cause not only symptoms of severe headache, but also may result in nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light or noise. They also commonly cause many other symptoms including visual disturbance, dizziness and vertigo. This means they cannot always be effectively treated with simple painkillers such as paracetamol, ibuprofen or codeine. It is important that people find an appropriate treatment for them."

A-HEAD OF THE GAME

Here are some ways that have been proven to help ease the pain caused by migraines.

Find the trigger By identifying migraine triggers, many sufferers can avoid the condition coming on and thus increase their quality of life.

Common migraine triggers that you may be able to avoid include cheese, caffeine and alcohol, stress, changes in sleep pattern, extreme fatigue, skipping meals and fasting, smoking, bright and flickering lights, strong odour and exercise.

Try magnesium According to the charity Migraine Action, two-thirds of sufferers who regularly use magnesium report that the mineral has eased their symptoms, or even eliminated their migraines altogether. Studies consistently indicate that magnesium is deficient in people who suffer from migraines and other types of headache, and that treating the deficiency alleviates the symptoms. Try a magnesium rich oil that can be absorbed through the skin and can be applied directly to tense neck and shoulders like Better You Magnesium Oil spray, £12.20 (from betteryou.com or Holland & Barrett).

Treat it right During a migraine attack, and other severe headaches, it's thought that blood vessels in the brain relax and become enlarged, which can make the pain very much worse. This discovery has led to the development of triptan drugs that work to constrict the blood vessels in the brain, relieving symptoms in around 60 per cent of migraine sufferers. Try Imigran £8.52 for two tablets, which contains sumatriptan to constrict the blood vessels. **☑**

CELEBRITY MIGRAINE SUFFERERS

(Clockwise from below) Supermodel Elle Macpherson is said to book acupuncture sessions when working under bright lights to prevent migraines; actor Ben Affleck has suffered a migraine on set so severe that he ended up in hospital; actress Lisa Kudrow has experienced migraines since childhood; and tennis ace Serena Williams was diagnosed with menstrual migraines after headaches started affecting her play



HEALTH NOTES



Hold on... Sometimes you need extra grip in a Pilates or yoga class which is why Every Second Counts has created its specialist added-traction Get a Grip 5 Toe Socks, £12. Each toe has a rubberised pad to help you grab the mat or reformer, making moves easier. Available from everysecondcounts.co.uk.



Heads up Having survived two brain tumours himself, actor and musician Martin Kemp enjoyed meeting young people who are recovering from the disease and sharing his experiences with them. "Great to meet so many brave young people," he said on his visit to HeadStart, the charity that raises awareness of symptoms of brain tumours in youngsters. Visit headsmart.org.uk for further details.



Easy rider Pippa Middleton kept her celebrated posterior well protected with a chamois cream during her marathon Race Across America cycle ride. "I think every cyclist including me will be layering it on," she said. Keen riders should try Assos Chamois Crème, £11.90, from wiggle.co.uk, an antibacterial, anti-friction skin cream formulated to prevent saddle sores.

