

# SPLIT WIDE OPEN

A sharp pain in the head has often got you down, but do you know what kind of headache you have? **Priyanka Pereira** finds out



Dr K Ravishankar, MD, consultant-in-charge, Jaslok and Lilavati Hospital

After the common cold, one of the most common ailments is the headache. But not many know that headache is just a broad term. There are several sub-types and controlling these aches depends upon the type you suffer from. Headaches fall into two broad categories: primary and secondary. "Ninety percent people suffer from primary headaches, which comprise migraine, cluster, tension-type and a few rare types," says Dr K Ravishankar, MD, consultant in-charge of The Headache and Migraine Clinic at Jaslok Hospital and Lilavati Hospital, Mumbai.

Secondary headaches are identifiable on examination. Some of the sinister causes are meningitis, tumor or blood vessel anomalies. "They constitute only 5-10 per cent of headaches seen in practice but if not treated on time they can endanger the life of a person," says Dr Ravishankar.

## MIGRAINE

People generally attribute sudden headaches to poor eyesight or sinusitis. "But these are not the most common," says Dr Ravishankar. Most of the headaches in reality are migraines. "Since there are different patterns to migraine, the recognition of a particular type is a little delayed," he adds.



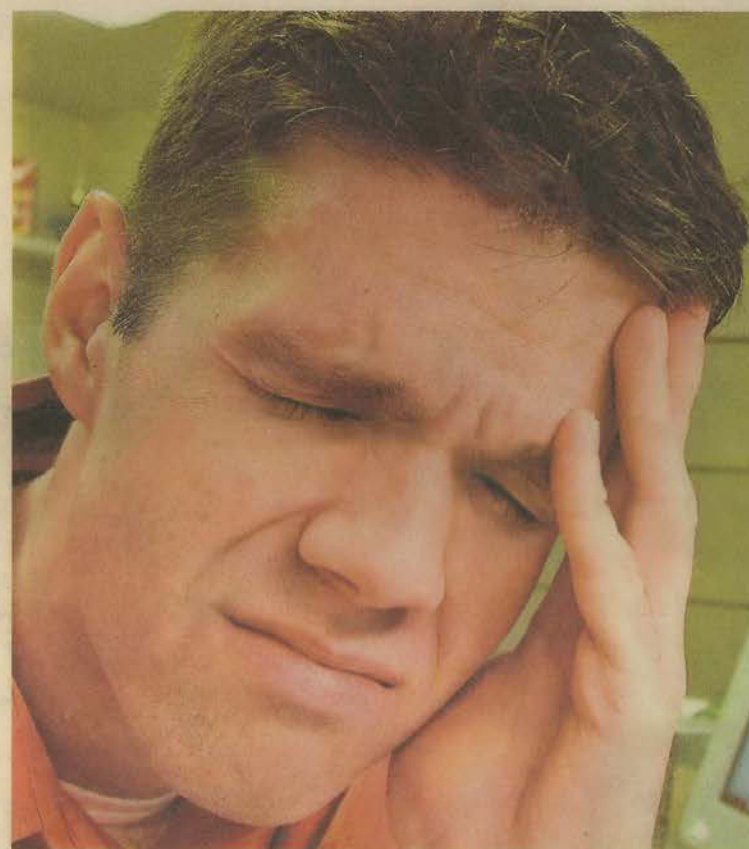
While migraine can occur in people of all age groups, it is most commonly seen in the age group of 15-40, especially women. "Migraines are linked with the female hormone oestrogen," explains Dr Ravishankar. The most common migraine symptoms are:

- Recurrent headaches
- It starts off as a one-sided (unilateral) headache, which gradually spreads
- Nausea and vomiting
- Intolerance to light and sound
- Patient wants to lie down and sleep in silence.

Among the many migraine triggers, the most common ones are:

- Exposure to sunlight. If the heat level is too high
- Change in temperature
- Environmental factors, such as pollution, odours, noise and so on
- Skipping breakfast
- Inadequate sleep
- Excessive physical exertion
- Emotional disturbances
- Fermented foodstuffs, monosodium glutamate (found in Chinese food), excess colas and cold items, caffeine overuse, citrus fruits
- Hormonal changes as during menstrual periods or HRT.

Migraines are genetically inherited and hence it is difficult to permanently cure them. But if properly diag-



nosed, they can be controlled:

- Take care of the triggering factors
- Don't indulge in self-medication
- A detailed examination is a must to rule out other causes and to know the severity of the migraine
- Depending on the intensity of the migraine, the correct medicine has to be prescribed. People who get frequent, prolonged attacks of migraine are prescribed preventive medications and those who get these attacks in spurts are prescribed acute medication
- Migraine sufferers can benefit merely by maintaining a regular routine, which includes eating and sleeping on time
- Regular follow-up and health check-up is also necessary.

Besides the above mentioned triggers, there are several other factors that trigger migraine and can well be classified as variants of migraine

## ICECREAM HEADACHE

Although the reason is not very clear, this is a form of headache which some people experience after consuming (very quickly) cold beverages/foods such as ice creams, slurpees or margaritas. The pain can be relieved by either lying down for sometime or sipping room temperature water.



## HAIR WASH HEADACHE

This is one of the peculiar types of migraines in India. Some patients get a

headache after they wash their hair. This is very similar to their usual migraine headache. They need to make judicious use of hair-dryers. Preventive anti-migraine medicines will help reduce the frequency and severity of these headaches.

## REBOUND HEADACHES

When migraines are not controlled in the early stages and when analgesics are overused, headaches can recur. "Many people have the habit of self-medication which can be dangerous when it comes to migraines," says Dr Ravishankar. One must avoid consuming painkillers which accentuate the headaches further and consult a doctor in case of severe pain.

## HEADACHES ACROSS AGES

Headaches are common in all ages, but the reasons differ. The causes could be:

## CHILDREN

It is often believed that migraine doesn't occur in children. But it is a fallacy. Migraine can occur in children of all ages. It occurs when kids don't eat on time and are exposed to sunlight during play hours. They are also subject to tension-type headaches because they are often stressed during examinations. Long study hours also tire their muscles.

## ADOLESCENTS

Headaches or migraine among adolescents is most commonly seen in girls,

because it is at this stage that they reach puberty and it is the hormonal changes that trigger this headache. Menstrual headaches are common and can take a toll on you.

## WOMEN

Migraines are commonly noticed during pregnancy because of the various body/hormonal changes. A woman again experiences headaches during menopause and also when undergoing hormone replacement therapy.

## SENIOR CITIZENS

Temporal arteritis — owing to an inflammation of the temporal artery — causes headaches. A significant rise in blood pressure, tumors and other ailments related to old age can cause headaches here too. Medication and relaxation is the only way to treat these headaches.

## AND IT CONTINUES

Generally, we term most headaches as migraines. But there are a variety of other headaches which may not be as common as migraine but are as painful and can disturb the routine life of chronic sufferers.

## TENSION-TYPE HEADACHE

The name might suggest that it is caused by severe tension, "but it is not the tension of the mind but the tension of the muscles that causes this headache," says Dr Ravishankar. It is a milder version of the migraine headache. They are caused by stress, muscular tension and postural changes. It is characterised by a dull headache at most times, spasms of the muscle, a little anxiety and depression. It is a featureless headache that can sometimes stay for almost 24 hours.

## CONTROLLING THIS HEADACHE

- Relax your muscles and consume anxiety reducing drugs
- Exercise (walk, jog, mild aerobics)



- Avoid stressful situations
- Be conscious of your posture and stay in a comfortable position while you are working.

## CLUSTER HEADACHE

When it comes to this one, women are safe. It is a rarer variety of headache which is seen in men only. It comes in clusters of 4-12 weeks and hence the name. It can occur daily over a period of weeks, sometimes months. It is very painful and it is characterised by the watering of the eyes. It may disappear and then recur during the same season in the following year. Only medical treatment with specific drugs will help. Your doctor has to design a treatment programme to prevent your cluster cycle.

## EXTRA-CRANIAL CAUSES

Sometimes it is not your head after all which causes headaches. There is a particular group of headaches which is associated with disorders in the eye, nose and sometimes also with dental problems. Each of these areas gives rise to different types of headaches. It is in controlling the underlying cause that this headache can be cured.

## HANGOVER HEADACHE

It happens to the best of us. You had the good intentions of not getting drunk but your host kept refilling the glass. Alcohol dilates the blood vessels and hence this headache is caused. You might want a magic pill or drink that will take care of this but the only certain and best way to treat this headache is 'Not to drink at all; or wait for that day when you will have a drink that does not produce dilatation of the blood vessels.'

## AILMENT RELATED HEADACHES

We might have noticed that headaches accompany most ailments like fever, chicken pox, measles and mumps. This is because the ailment within our body dilates blood vessels. You can control this type by curing the cause of the ailment.

There are other rare primary headaches which need to be examined before treatment.

