

Managing MIGRAINE

HEALTH *Migraine is far more prevalent than heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure and yet, it hardly gets attention, says KAMALA THIAGARAJAN*

The pain can be intense and unrelenting. It can derail your daily routine, cripple your ability to think and function normally. Perhaps that's why headaches may seem like a horrible curse for sufferers. The more chronic patients are often resigned to the pain and mistakenly feel that medical science has no answers. However, it is possible to find relief.

When it's all in the head: "There are two kinds of headaches – primary and secondary," says Dr K Ravishankar, head of the Headache and Migraine Clinic at Jaslok Hospital and Research Centre and Lila-lavati Hospital and Research Centre, Mumbai. "Primary headaches follow a definite repetitive pattern (cluster headache sufferers may find the headache cropping up at the same time every day). Migraine attacks are often linked to a trigger (unavoidable external conditions such as heat, sunlight or sweat) and it is usually a chronic condition, one that you may have had to deal with for years." By contrast, with a secondary headache you will be able to establish an underlying cause such as an accident (head injury) or a

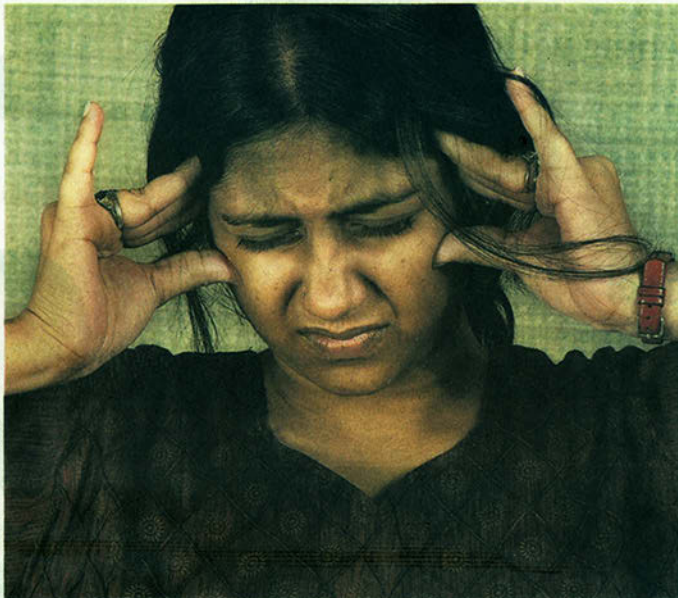
tumour. There are structural changes within the skull cavity. Pain starts as a new complaint and can keep escalating in a very short time. A secondary headache can sometimes be life-threatening and will require deeper investigation through scans to confirm diagnosis.

You cannot however judge the nature of your headache based on the pain. "Paradoxically, primary headaches that do not pose any risk to your life can be extremely painful. And there are cases when the dangerous secondary headache could be associated with a mild headache," says Dr Ravishankar.

Fortunately, secondary headaches are less common and for most chronic sufferers, it is migraine that does the most damage.

Migraine – a vulnerability of the brain: If you have a family history of migraine and experience frequent headaches that are accompanied by nausea, neck pain, intolerance to noise and light and if your symptoms last for 12-24 hours, leaving you tired and weak after an attack, then you suffer from migraines.

"Migraine is the commonest



cause of all primary headaches," says Dr Ravishankar. "And though the condition can be easily treated, it is unfortunate that it is often misdiagnosed or unrecognized. A wide-spread misconception is that these headaches are a result of health-related issue such as sinusitis, eye problems, acidity and even psychological issues which is never the case. Seldom do people realise that migraines are genetically inherited. It is a vulnerability that originates in the brain and since it is a part of your biological design, it cannot be prevented. But with the right

drugs, we can keep pain well under control."

Identifying the triggers: In order to reduce the intensity and the frequency of attacks, you must learn to identify the hidden triggers that cause migraines. The triggers differ from person to person but analysing your general lifestyle and food habits, especially before an attack is an important aspect of treatment.

One lesser-known trigger is an empty stomach. "Fasting, especially skipping breakfast has been known to cause attacks. Foods containing MSG, packaged and

processed snacks, cottage cheese and fermented foods such as idli, dosa and dhokla can act as triggers. And then there is the "hair wash headache" when not drying your hair properly after a hair-wash can lead to severe migraines. Other common triggers are prevalent in metro cities such as rush-hour traffic, stress and pollution," says Dr Ravishankar. "Sufferers must seek treatment because by managing one's lifestyle and armed with the right medication, it is possible to find lasting relief from pain and enjoy a better quality of life."