

## Pain Manager

# Oxygen and jabs may help

**W**hen it comes, the pain is usually on one side of the head, rarely switching to the other side.

The so-called cluster headache causes some of the most severe pain known to man.

Sufferers say their torment is worse than that caused by a kidney stone or giving birth without anaesthesia.

Usually localised behind the eye, but sometimes radiating to the face and neck, the cluster headache can also cause congestion in the eyes and a runny nose.

The cause has been traced to the hypothalamus, which is located at the base of the brain.

Luckily, unlike with migraines, it seldom lasts long: A 15-minute attack is not uncommon, although three-hour-long episodes have been recorded.

Also, there is medicine that the sufferer can take as soon as he feels an attack coming on, which can shorten the "cluster period" and decrease the severity of the headache.

If you are prone to cluster headaches, carry the medicine with you at all times.

If the pain comes when you are driving, pull up to the side of the road immediately, and rest till the headache goes away.

Abortive treatment to stop the pain is difficult due to the brief duration of the acute cluster attack.

However, you may wish to invest in an oxygen tank at home if you have frequent attacks, as high-flow oxygen is effective in up to 75 per cent of patients.

This is more usually given in a

hospital.

When an attack occurs, breathe in the oxygen through a mask.

If you are not sure oxygen will help, you can rent a tank, rather than buy one, to find out.

Otherwise, a local anaesthetic injected to the back of the neck or the side of the jaw could stop the pain.

In some patients, one such injection makes future attacks less severe, or more treatable with medicine, for weeks or months to come.

Finally, for patients with chronic cluster headaches that cannot be treated with standard therapy, surgery may help.

It can result in a permanent cure, but since all operations carry a risk, surgery should be considered as a last resort.

— DR YEO SOW NAM, SINGAPORE GENERAL HOSPITAL, AND  
DR CHARLES SIOW, NATIONAL NEUROSCIENCE INSTITUTE