

## Pain Manager

# Identify, avoid triggers

It's your headache too if both your parents have this — migraine. There's a 75 per cent chance that the children of parents who both suffer from migraines will get them too.

The chances if only one parent is a migraine sufferer? About 50 per cent.

If even a distant relative suffers from migraine, a 20 per cent chance exists that any offspring will be prone.

If you're a woman, your chances of getting migraine are much higher than if you're a man.

Besides migraine being a hereditary condition, it can also be "triggered", according to recent research.

Triggers may include certain foods like monosodium glutamate, stress, hormonal changes for women, and environmental changes, like being under the hot sun.

Once you have identified your triggers, avoiding them can reduce the number of headaches you get. An attack can last from several hours to several days, totally incapacitating the sufferer.

It can seem like someone has taken a hammer and is rhythmically pounding away at one side of your head. Moving the head causes pain. A sufferer feels nauseous and is sensitive to light and sound.

Fewer than one third of sufferers experience an "aura". They may see flashes of light, blind spots, zig-zag lines and shimmering lights. They may also go blind temporarily before the attack.

Migraine can be effectively managed and medications fall into preventive and abortive categories.

Preventive medicine is taken daily to prevent headaches. Abortive medicine is taken only when the headache starts, to stop the pain.

Non-drug treatments include relaxation techniques, proper sleep and diet habits, exercise, and the avoidance of triggers.

Biofeedback can pinpoint the muscles that tense up and cause the migraine. Patients are hooked up to the machine during an attack. Up to 20 or so different muscles in the head and shoulders can be monitored.

Once the muscles are identified, patients can work at relaxing those muscles. Some general stretching exercises that can ease headaches include using your hands to pull your head to the sides, front and back.

Other treatments include acupuncture, massage to relax your muscles and the simple application of heat for long-standing headaches, and cold for an acute headache that may be caused by inflammation.

Patients can do relaxation exercise that takes only 15-30 minutes. They sit down comfortably, close their eyes and consciously try to relax the taut muscles.

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