Pain Manager

Tense in the head

Does your head appear to hurt all over? Is it a dull, non-pulsating pain as though someone is squeezing your brains out of your skull?

It's nothing to worry about. It's a tension headache you have. About 78 per cent of all headaches are classified this way.

Slightly more women than men appear to experience this, although it's probably because more women than men seek treatment.

There are two types of tension-type headaches: those that occur on an episodic basis and those that occur daily.

Episodic headaches may be related to stress and may disappear with the use of over-the-counter analgesics such as Panadol, withdrawal from the source of stress and a brief period of relaxation.

One of the most common causes of stress-induced headaches is related to work.

There are people who get headaches only during the work week, never on weekends or when they are on vacation. One teacher, for example, got headaches only during term time.

Others have headaches induced by shift work, or from bad posture, such as a dentist bending for long periods over a patient. Children sometimes get headaches when an exam approaches.

If the headache is chronic, with the pain occurring half the month or more, it should be promptly treated.

This will prevent overuse of pain-relieving drugs — particularly triptans and cafergot — which could lead to a "rebound" headache caused by the drug itself.

The headache could become more frequent, even daily, and be more painful and resistant to painkillers.

The daily headache is often accompanied by depression or other emotional problems. Sufferers usually wake up in the morning with the headache and have an accompanying sleep disorder.

If your headache makes you depressed, early treatment is importance. If your GP can't help, and the pain remains severe and persistent, you should see a specialist.

Pain can lead to a vicious circle of more pain, psychological distress, depression and, therefore, even more suffering.

Sometimes, not taking stimulants like coffee before going to bed, and getting a firm pillow and mattress to give you a good night's sleep could do the trick.

Botox injections can prevent headaches for four to six months, or as long as your facelift. A local anaesthetic injection could also result in weeks or months without a headache.

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