

Advice for summer headaches

Summer can be a painful time for people who suffer from headaches.

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Most people look forward to summer and its long, lazy weekends and holidays full of braais, swimming, sports, and picnics. But many headache sufferers think of summer as a season of pain and misery because of the heat, combined with seasonal changes in the air e.g. pollen, serve to trigger their headaches and migraines.

Dr Elliot Shevel (B.D.S., Dip. M.F.O.S., M.B., B.Ch.), the founder and chairman of the South African Headache Society and medical director at The Headache Clinic

"Many people experience migraines and headaches after they have spent time in the summer sun without the protection of a hat or sunshade. The small arteries of the scalp are known to be the source of migraine pain for many people, and it is possible that summer heat triggers migraines by causing these arteries to dilate," says Dr Shevel.

Headache trigger: Dehydration

During summer, people who are prone to headaches and migraines should drink plenty of fluids. Dehydration is known to trigger migraines in some people, so be sure to remain properly hydrated in summer. "It is best to drink plain water, as many carbonated soft drinks contain substances that can also trigger headaches. Substances that headache sufferers should avoid include common ingredients in soft drinks such as caffeine and aspartame," says Dr Shevel.

Headache trigger: Bright light

"Many headache and migraine sufferers are sensitive to bright light and avoid it when they have a headache. However, they should also remember that bright light may also be a headache trigger. It is wise to wear sunglasses for protection. Polarised lenses are recommended, as they are effective in cutting out glare. A suitable hat may also be helpful," says Dr Shevel.

Headache trigger: Seasonal change

A change in seasons also bring changes in the pollen types that are in the air and these may directly trigger headaches, or cause hay-fever with headaches and sinus congestion and pressure as a secondary condition.

Headache trigger: Stress

Summer can also be a very stressful time, thanks to large family gatherings over the festive season, and stress is a major headache trigger. Headache and migraine sufferers should try to manage stress and plan ahead of time for big family get-togethers and holidays to avoid tension headaches. For example, try to avoid last minute gift shopping, ensure your car is serviced before travelling, delegate chores to family members, and make travel reservations well in advance.

Headache trigger: Odours and fragrances

People who are sensitive to fragrances and/ other odours should bear this in mind when shopping for sunscreen, insect repellent, and other summer products. Seek those that are fragrance free and ask a pharmacist for advice if necessary.

Ice-cream Headaches

Perhaps the most common summer headache of all is the "ice-cream headache", triggered by the ingestion of cold beverages and confections. These headaches are easy to control by avoiding cold fluids and ice cream, or simply by taking smaller and slower mouthfuls, so that the substance warms up quicker in the mouth. One can make an ice-cream headache melt away faster by pressing one's tongue up into the palate of the mouth.

It is essential that anyone that suffers from headaches has a thorough medical and neurological examination especially in the presence of fever and neck pain, or if the pain is becoming progressively worse. Once serious conditions have been excluded, a multidisciplinary investigation into, and treatment of, the cause of the headache as pioneered by Dr Shevel in South Africa is the route most likely to result in the effective prevention of further headaches.

For more information you can visit www.headacheclinic.co.za or call 0861 678 911

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