

HEALTH

# Pain really is in neck

## SOURCE OF MIGRAINES AND HEADACHES STEMS FROM 'POWDER KEG' AT BASE OF THE BRAIN

Kylie Adoranti

IF ANYONE knows how bad migraines and headaches can get, it is Graeme Peterson.

The 62-year-old has suffered from severe migraines and tension headaches for more than five decades.

Constant headaches and migraines took over the Langwarrin resident's life, forced him to take sick days and cancel social events.

Mr Peterson's migraines were so bad they made him vomit and pass out. The tension headaches gave him an excruciating pain in his head to the point where he needed to lie down.

His migraines and tension headaches usually occurred

every two to three days and lasted more than 24 hours.

"Generally I would get tension headaches overnight, I would have to get up and go to the shower, run it as hot as I can bare it and massage my head and neck. That made a bit of a difference," he said.

Mr Peterson, who used to work as a medic in the navy, had to take many days off from the job.

"It was frustrating. I can remember in the navy that I couldn't go on board some ships because they were worried I would get a headache," he said.

Almost every headache relief or remedy one could think of, Mr Peterson would have most likely tried it.

When he visited the Melbourne Headache Clinic, his neck was assessed.

"Over the years you get less and less confident. But for once when my neck was checked out, my spine was looked at - there was a lot of tension there. My spine was manipulated and pressure put on it. I do special exercises every day," he said.

"I haven't had a migraine since June."

Melbourne Headache Centre director Roger O'Toole said the neck should be considered.

"We would say by and large, about only 1 per cent of people are being treated for their neck," he said.

Mr O'Toole said the overactive brainstem or

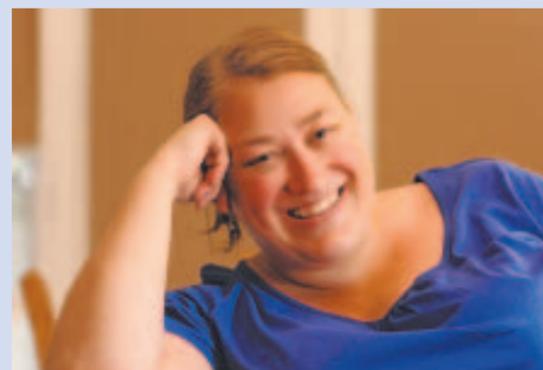
headache centre at the base of the brain has a pain filter for the head and neck.

"This part of the brain stem is a powder keg of activity, and the upper part of the neck has direct access to it. Some sparks from the upper cervical spine can easily blow it up and cause a headache or migraine," he said.

Alex Wynd, provisional psychologist at clinical physiology at Monash University, is conducting a research project with people who have severe headache disorders and depression.

Mr Wynd said people with headaches are more likely to get depressed.

To take part in the study, email Alex on Alex.wynd@monash.edu



### 'Liberated' from aches

HEADACHES affected her work, her social life and her day-to-day activities.

Fiona Moger used to get headaches at least three times a week, which caused her to miss days off work and stopped her going out.

Ms Moger, 39, said her headaches began when she hit puberty.

"I started to get horrific migraines. I would lose vision and the use of my tongue, I couldn't speak," she said.

"I used to be a social worker and worked in foster care. I made the choice to cut back my

hours and work part time because of the stress and I was feeling drained, but even then I was always getting headaches."

Ms Moger decided enough was enough and made a trip to the Melbourne Headache Centre to see if her headaches could be stopped.

Her neck was assessed and she had to do neck exercises. Ms Moger said she had never felt better.

"I feel like I have been liberated. I am more open to trying new things."

### CONDITION

■ Migraines affect more than three million Australians, and tension headaches affect more than seven million Australians.

■ Originally considered to be less than 1 per cent of all headaches, neck-based headache may now account for nearly 80 per cent of cases.

■ An overactive part of the brainstem is the underlying problem in all major headache types, and the top of the neck is a major input into this area.

■ To reach a diagnosis of tension headache or migraine all other potential sources of headache have to be excluded. Has a neck expert excluded your neck as the source?

■ People add 1-2 hours of aggravation a day by looking down into a smartphone/tablet/book, instead of looking out the window.



### THE FACTS

Each person is different. General tips or advice can be difficult and should always be taken in conjunction with expert assessment. There is some common advice that can help before and after successful management.

■ Watch your posture, especially sitting at work, home (couches) and in the car. Poor posture (head down or slouched/

chin forward) is the fastest way to aggravate the problem.

■ Keep a headache diary noting when you get migraines, the location and severity of the pain (0 = no pain, 10 = worst pain imaginable), how long they last and what you were doing/eating before the attack.

■ Take up 15-20 minutes of exercise at least three times a week.

■ Improve your strength and posture by doing clinical pilates or yoga.



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