

# Mail Today

We need to pay close attention to our body's symptoms to understand when they are serious enough to warrant a trip to the doctor

BY MANU MOUDGIL

**D**O YOU wake up coughing every morning or are you bothered by a headache that flares up in the evenings? While most aches, pains and sometimes even swellings are usually not a cause for worry, occasionally they may mean that you have a serious or even life-threatening condition. Getting smart about whether your headache warrants a trip to the doctor or just a nap is essential to your good health.

# Oh Doc, I am in trouble

## ■ CHEST PAIN

Though chest pain is not as common a symptom as a headache, it may indicate a bigger problem. If you get a burning pain after meals or when lying down, and it's accompanied by belching, bloating, or an acid taste, this is nothing more than a heartburn. If you get it only occasionally, over-the-counter antacids should make you feel better.

However, if heartburn recurs frequently, this is a sign that you could have gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). In this condition, stomach acid or, occasionally, bile flows back

into your food pipe. The constant acid reflux can irritate the lining of your esophagus and cause inflammation. Such irritation can lead to complications such as narrowing of the esophagus and ulcers.

If along with chest pain you're short of breath, coughing a lot, have a fever and your phlegm is yellow or green, or the pain lasts more than three days, you might have pneumonia. The chest pain can also be an indication of a pulled muscle or even a fractured rib. So contact your physician if symptoms last longer than two days.

### You should worry if..

■ your chest pain is related to cardiovascular disease. It is easy enough to distinguish this kind of

pain from other pains just by paying attention. "Angina occurs after you exert yourself or when you're angry, and goes away within 20 minutes when you stop to rest. However, if it doesn't go away, it may be a sign that you're having a heart attack," says Dr Praveen Chandra, consultant cardiologist, Max Healthcare. Chew and swallow an aspirin, and drink a glass of water—this thins the blood, helping to get more of it to the heart.

■ the chest pain is accompanied by a shortness of breath or worsens when you inhale as this could indicate a collapsed lung or a blood clot that has travelled to the lung—this most often occurs after you've been confined to a bed or seat (car, bus, train, or plane) for many hours. It's time to rush to a hospital.



## ■ SPINNING HEAD

Feeling unsteady or light-headed indicates that we are low on energy, dehydrated or have spent too long in the heat or sun. Dizziness frequently precedes or accompanies a migraine. Alcohol, narcotics and motion sickness also make some people feel dizzy. It is also possible that you are experiencing a drug reaction to some medication you are taking.

Beyond this, however, dizziness that lasts more than two weeks may be due to high blood pressure or low blood sugar.

### You should worry if..

■ the dizziness is accompanied by laboured or rapid breathing and a sensation of fear as you may be in for an anxiety attack. If it happens often, you may have a panic disorder and should talk to your doctor about it.

■ the dizziness occurs when you move your head or turn it rapidly, you could be suffering from a mild inner-ear disorder. However, if it is followed by hearing loss in one ear and/or pain, numbness, or tingling of the face, the ear problem is more serious. You may have nerve damage caused by a benign tumor called an acoustic neuroma.

■ the dizziness is accompanied by paralysis on one side of your face. "If this is accompanied by numbness or tingling in your limbs, slurred speech, blurred vision, or a sudden loss of vision in either eye, it's possible you've got multiple sclerosis or are having a stroke," says Dr Hareesh Sidhwa, consultant internal medicine, Fortis Hospital.



## ■ TUMMY GRIPES

We generally associate stomach pains with indigestion or bad food. Fortunately, most of the time these are the causes, and if the pain goes away by itself, there is nothing to worry about.

If you have pain in the upper part of your abdomen which occurs either just after meals or many hours later when your stomach is empty, you may have heartburn or an ulcer. Take antacids or over-the-counter drugs to reduce the amount of acid your stomach produces. If your symptoms last longer or get worse, get an upper gastrointestinal X-ray and an endoscopy test done.

### You should worry if..

■ your stomach pain is accompanied by symptoms like nausea. "A severe pain going to the back along with nausea and vomiting besides constipation or gastritis may be an indication of pancreatitis. Intestinal obstruction

also causes these symptoms" says Dr M P Sharma, head of internal medicine and gastroenterology, Rockland Hospital.

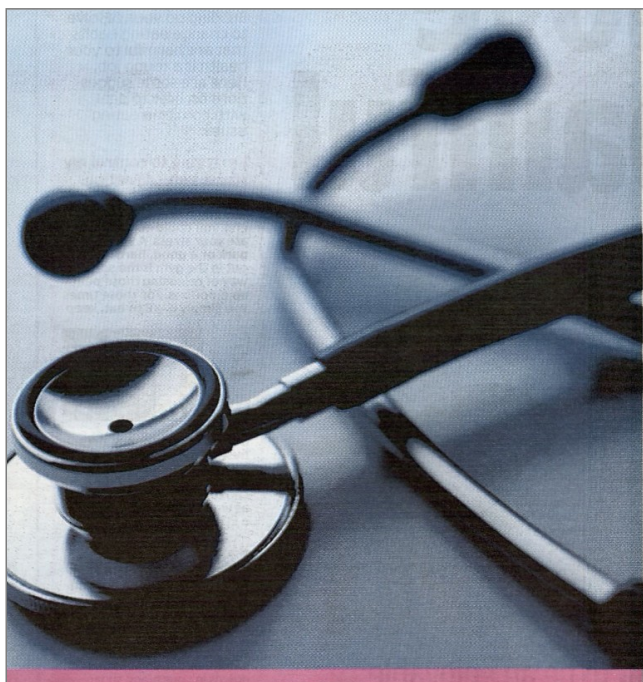
■ your stomach pain is in the lumbar region, as this may be due to a urinary tract infection. Other symptoms include a burning sensation during urination and blood in the urine. If the pain is accompanied by a swelling in the scrotum region and worsens when you lean forward, strain or lift heavy objects you should get yourself checked for hernia.

■ your tummy ache begins around your navel and shifts to your lower right abdomen, as this indicates appendicitis. The pain usually increases over a period of 6 to 12 hours, and may become severe.

■ you are a woman above 40 years and are obese, pain in the upper right abdomen may be due to gallstone. The pain may extend to the back or shoulder and may be accompanied by fever. A timely surgery can help you avoid complications.

■ your stomach pain is accompanied by a loss of appetite, unexplained weight loss and constipation. "These are generally symptoms of cancer. Get your endoscopic tests done. Another alarming condition indicated by stomach pain is heart attack. The pain is high in the middle of your abdomen and goes into the centre of your chest, neck, or shoulders accompanied by sweating and palpitation," says Dr Sharma.

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### ■ THROBBING TEMPLES

All of us have experienced throbbing pain in the head. In fact, ninety eight per cent of people in this world get headaches. Chances are that the other two percent simply don't feel the pain as much as their friends.

Headaches related to tension, migraine and brain tumours are the most frequent. As is evident by its name, a tension headache is stress induced and manifests as a band-like pain felt on the frontal portion of the skull. "This can also be due to too much reading, eye strain, a running nose or sinusitis. There is nothing much to worry about since it goes away once the nerves relax," says Dr Paramjit Bawa, chief neurosurgeon, Mata Chanan Devi Hospital. A headache can also be caused by toxic fumes.

If your headache is accompanied by dizziness, confusion and nausea, some fresh air may alleviate it. A migraine differs from a regular headache in that it generally affects half the head and is throbbing in nature.

It may be accompanied by nausea and vomiting besides watering eyes and nose. If you get this on a regular basis, talk to your doctor about medications that can alleviate the pain or prevent the migraine altogether.



### You should worry if..

■ your headache is severe in the morning and is accompanied by vomiting with or without nausea. "The reason may be a brain tumour. Depending upon its position, you may also have weakness in one leg or arm, blurred vision, slurred speech, forgetfulness and problem in balancing your body," says Dr Bawa. Brain tumour is easier to detect in elderly.

■ you are over 50 years old and get frequent headaches. This could indicate something serious like an aneurysm, a brain tumour or an infection such as encephalitis, since the most common types of headaches typically occur in younger people. Throbbing temples may also signal meningitis. "Severe pain, nausea, vomiting, and a fever of more than 100 degrees, loss of consciousness, a stiff neck, or blurred vision are all signs of meningitis or a brain hemorrhage. Tuberculosis may also make itself evident with a headache and a low grade fever. However, if a headache follows a blow to your head, it's nothing more than a mild concussion," says Dr Bawa.

■ your headache is accompanied by vomiting, nausea, blurred vision, confusion, or memory problems, you could have a serious concussion.

### ■ TOOTH ACHE

All of us have suffered from tooth ache as children and as we grow old, the pain keeps coming back due to bad eating habits or lack of oral hygiene. Tooth ache occurs due to inflammation of the central portion of the tooth which contains nerve endings that are very sensitive to pain. It may be caused by dental cavities, trauma and infection. most of the time.

If the pain is accompanied with fever, it's an indication of infection. Simple dental decay such as caries does not cause fever. These signs may signify an infection surrounding the tooth, the gum, or the jaw bone. Fever and swelling may indicate the presence of an abscess.

### You should worry if..

■ the pain is present at the angle of your jaw. If every time you open your mouth widely you have

pain, it is likely that the temporomandibular (TMJ) joint has been injured or inflamed. This can occur from an injury or just by trying to eat something that is too big. Your dentist may be able to suggest solutions to this problem.

■ the tooth ache is accompanied by pain, pressure, and fullness in your cheeks, brow or forehead. Pain may worsen when you bend forward or lie down. This may be indication of sinusitis. But if this pain is accompanied with nausea or vomiting, it can be indication of migraine.

■ the pain is severe, crushing, squeezing, or pressing, and is accompanied by dizziness, sweating, shortness of breath, or pain or tingling in the neck, or arms. These are all signs of a heart attack. Then chew and swallow an aspirin, and drink a glass of water—this thins the blood, helping to get more of it to the heart.

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