

Family Matters

coping with life

● money ● health ● life ● food ● fashion ● horoscope ●

Non-stop pain forced Andy to give up his job

WE'VE ALL suffered from a headache at some time. There can be many causes — from tension and eye strain to being a symptom of flu or perhaps sinusitis.

In time, and maybe with the help of painkillers, the headache will disappear, leaving no lingering memory of how bad it was.

But not for Andy McDowell, from Tobermory on the island of Mull.

Andy is a cluster headache sufferer. He can have as many as six extremely debilitating headaches in a day.

Four years ago the attacks became so severe he had to give up his job. The pain is so bad he takes oxygen to help bring some relief.

By Jill Scott

“SIX years ago I was admitted to Oban’s Lorn and Isles Hospital after taking ill at home,” says Andy (42).

“My temperature was sky-high and my wife Sandra says I kept punching my right eye and kicking out as though I was in extreme pain.

“But I can’t remember any of this.

“I was diagnosed as having a viral infection. At first it was thought the terrible right-sided headache I had was caused by sinusitis.

“But the frequent attacks of excruciating pain in the area of my right eye didn’t stop once I was back home.

“I was no stranger to headaches having been a migraine sufferer for 20 years, but this pain was 100 times worse.

“It was like having a red hot corkscrew pushed into your eye.”

There were regular trips to the doctor and referrals to specialists to try to determine the cause of Andy’s intense headaches.

He was eventually diagnosed at the Institute of Neurology in London as being a sufferer of cluster headache. It’s a condition that affects one in 500 of the population.

Cluster headache involves one-sided pain. It’s mainly behind or around the eye, the top and side of the head or within the temple area.

A single attack focuses on one side of the head or face, although the headache can change sides between attacks.

Other features include a reddening and tearing of the eye, a runny or blocked nostril, droopy eyelid, constriction of the pupil, flushing and facial sweating.

It’s known to be one of the most painful conditions humans can experience with female sufferers describing an attack as more painful than childbirth.

Attacks can last from minutes to a few hours, but for some

people it could be weeks or even months with some pain-free periods bringing relief.

When they occur can be regular, starting at the same time of the year, and at the same time during the day or night.

It’s called the “alarm clock headache” by some because of the predictability.

Andy’s case is extreme with unrelenting headaches several times a day, every day, even waking him up during the night.

“I usually have between four and six attacks a day,” he explains. “It can take less than

five seconds for the pain to come on.

“They can vary in length from 20 minutes to three hours and when an attack happens I can do little except sit in a chair and rock back and forwards.

Oxygen

“I’ve been known to punch myself in a bid to move the pain and I feel as though I’d like pull my eye out just to get some relief.”

Taking oxygen helps ease the pain and Andy has a supply at home. When an attack happens he inhales it for between 20 minutes and half an hour.

Andy also takes a drug called Imigran which has to be self-injected as soon as an attack occurs.

“Imigran can’t be taken any more than twice a day,” he tells me, “so I try to only use the oxygen at home and keep the Imigran if we’re going out.”

There is no known cause of cluster headache but certain things can trigger it.

“I was head chef in a pub in Tobermory,” says Andy. “We served good, plain fare and I used to do a lot of baking.

“Heat is known to be a trigger of cluster headache

and I was having attack after attack as soon as the kitchen was hot.

“My boss was very understanding but I was eventually taking so much time off work I had to take my doctor’s advice, which was I had to look after myself.

“I loved my job but I knew I had to give it up. It was a real blow to leave.

“I no longer touch alcohol either, as that’s known to be a trigger too.”

Andy hasn’t been dealt a good hand in life where health is concerned. Eighteen years ago he was diagnosed as

having fibromyalgia that causes pain and stiffness in the muscles, ligaments and tendons.

“I don’t take any medication for it, though,” he says. “I can cope with it.”

But the cluster headaches are a much bigger challenge.

Not being able to work and being in such frequent pain has been a real blow to Andy’s confidence and to his, and his family’s, lifestyle.

He and Sandra (40) have two children Andrew (15) and Natalie (11) and Andy has a son, Simon (20) from a previous relationship.

“We don’t have holidays and it’s virtually impossible to pre-arrange anything as I have no idea how I will feel,” he reveals

“Going into warm places can bring on an attack and I’ve had to leave some places because of one.

“Luckily the children don’t ask for much.

“Sandra and I go for a walk when we can. I like to fish but can’t even consider it on a very warm day.”

Support

Sandra has been a huge support to Andy.

“She’s my rock,” he says. “I probably wouldn’t be here without her.

“When I was diagnosed she found out about an organisation called OUCH (UK) — The Organisation for the Understanding of Cluster Headache.”

The charity aims to raise awareness of the condition and helps sufferers and their supporters.

Appreciating the help they have had from the charity Sandra and Andy now work as volunteers on its helpline.

The condition doesn’t usually start until people are in their 30s or 40s but through the helpline they’ve heard of a boy who’s been suffering since he was five.

Andy regularly attends the Southern General Hospital in Glasgow where he sees consultant neurologist Dr Alok Tyagi.

Next Sunday, Dr Tyagi and Dr Manjit Matharu, consultant neurologist at the National Institute for Neurology and Neurosurgery in London, will be guest speakers at an event organised by OUCH in Glasgow for sufferers and their supporters.

There is a charge of £10 per person to cover costs.

For more information visit www.ouchuk.org or email info@ouchuk.org

Helpline number for OUCH is 01646 651 979.



■ Though their lives have been changed for ever by his headaches, Andy and Sandra still find time to help others in a similar situation via the OUCH (UK) helpline.

Chef couldn’t stand the heat so had to get out of the kitchen — because of horrific headaches