

# WHAT'S WRONG *with me?*

Ever had a weird symptom you couldn't explain? Here are a few that you shouldn't ignore, writes Rachel Smith

**F**unny twinges, ongoing infections, not feeling 'right'... these can all be signs of your body's red-flag system. And if you stop and listen to your symptoms, says GP Dr Leon Massage, you're more likely to catch things before they become chronic – or serious. "Keeping a health diary is probably overly neurotic, but it's essential to keep an updated list of the tablets you're on – and to know what they're for." Also, monitor any worrying symptoms on a calendar, especially if they're increasing in severity, occur at certain times or via definite triggers.

## **SYMPTOM** FATIGUE AND 'BRAIN FOG'

**What it might be:** "Obstructive sleep apnoea, which can cause fatigue,

depression and heart disease, often goes undiagnosed in moderately overweight people who don't have the classic broad-necked appearance of severe obesity," says endocrinologist Dr Soji Swaraj.

**What it probably is:** "Women in particular may attribute fatigue and brain fog to work stress or child-rearing demands – and we're all too busy to go to the doctor," says Swaraj. "However, if after a few weeks you notice you're tired all the time, you need to ask, 'What's going on here?' and see your GP who will examine you, assess your medical history, sleep, lifestyle, exercise habits and how you're feeling generally."

## **SYMPTOM** LOSING KILOS FAST

**What it might mean:** "Rapid weight

loss could be due to someone who's just becoming deficient in insulin and really needs insulin and diabetic treatment," says Swaraj. Massage agrees: "An average person weighing 65kg to 85kg who suddenly sheds 5kg or more over a couple of weeks or months, despite no change to the diet, is a concern. Worst case scenario? It could be cancer."

**What it probably is:** "Weight fluctuations can be due to mild dehydration or from finishing a heavy period," says Massage. Unless it's a rapid loss of 5kg or more, it's probably not a cause for worry.

## **SYMPTOM** SUDDEN WEIGHT GAIN

**What it might mean:** Bloating or sudden weight gain, back pain, fatigue, heartburn or changes in ►



toilet habits can be symptoms of ovarian cancer. Studies show 83 per cent of women had at least one of these symptoms in the year before their diagnosis. “Gauge the severity of symptoms – if you’re gaining weight without cause and feeling horrible overall, that’s a sign to get to your GP,” says Massage. Other causes? “Rapid weight gain for no good reason can be a sign of insulin resistance or pre-diabetes,” says Swaraj.

**What it probably is:** “Bloating could be due to an issue with lactose or from eating too much starch,” says Massage. “It could also be due to excess fluid, constipation, or being premenstrual.”

#### SYMPTOM

### A PIMPLE, BLEMISH OR MOLE THAT DEVELOPS, CHANGES OR LOOKS OUT OF PLACE

**What it could be:** As we live in a country with one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world, we need to regularly monitor any changes in our skin, says dermatologist Dr Robert Rosen. “The commonest skin cancer is basal cell carcinoma (BCC) – a lump which develops over a period of time, is usually painless and looks like a pearly sort of pimple – it’ll affect about two-thirds of Australians in their lifetime and is not terribly lethal if caught early and treated.” Other more aggressive tumours such as squamous cell cancers (SCC) and melanoma can metastasise, spreading to other areas, so it’s crucial to get any changes looked at as soon as you notice them.

**What it probably is:** Chances are it’s just a pimple or harmless mole, but check anyway. “If you’ve got something that doesn’t look like everything else you’ve got, see a dermatologist,” he says.

#### SYMPTOM

### PERSISTENTLY ITCHY SKIN

**What it could be:** “There are so many



things which can cause itchy skin, it’s tough to diagnose. Undiagnosed hepatitis can cause itching all over. Chronically itchy skin can also mean there’s an underlying problem with the liver known as cholestasis, where you get a build-up of bile acids in the liver,” says Massage. If you’re pregnant and suffering unexplained itching, particularly on the hands and feet, get checked out – obstetric cholestasis can result in jaundice or premature labour.

**What it probably is:** “Itching is usually related to an allergy and people who get hayfever or eczema are more likely to experience itching. But if it’s chronic, investigate it.”

#### SYMPTOM

### PINS AND NEEDLES IN YOUR FEET

**What it could be:** Too much booze could be the cause, says Swaraj. “It

may also be critical deficiency in important vitamins such as B12 and folate. Or a sign of peripheral neuropathy, a diabetic condition.”

**What it probably is:** Usually, pins and needles just mean poor circulation. “However, as with any symptom you’re worried about, your GP needs to see you, examine your feet and take a medical history.”

#### SYMPTOM

### SHORTNESS OF BREATH OR PALPITATIONS

**What it could be:** If you’re gasping for air when lying or sitting down, that could be a sign of lung problems or heart failure, says cardiologist Dr Laurence Schneider. “Pain is an obvious symptom – some people may mistake heart pain for indigestion, but chest pressure, tightness or heaviness or a pain radiating from the arm into



## Headache

“The most common cause of headaches is tension, stress and the like,” says Massage. “Headaches can also be caused by sinusitis, infections and vision problems.”

the neck, jaw or back could be heart related. Palpitations are a common thing, especially among women – it seems to be hormonally related. Most palpitations are benign, but could point to a heart rhythm problem.”

**What it probably is:** Asthma and anxiety attacks can result in shortness of breath, as can a lack of fitness. When to worry? “Get to a doctor if you’re exerting yourself and you notice pain, tightness, shortness of breath; if both your ankles are swollen; or you’re getting palpitations out of the blue.”

### SYMPTOM NIGHT SWEATS

**What it could be:** “We immediately think lymphoma, but night sweats can also be a symptom of menopause, and chronic infection such as tuberculosis, which does occur in our population,” says

Swaraj. “If you’ve got other symptoms such as weight loss and swollen lymph glands and are in a high-risk category, night sweats can also be a sign of HIV.”

**What it probably is:** “An occasional night sweat is nothing to worry about – it’s probably due to a viral infection, but if they’re not going away after a week or two it makes sense to go to your GP and have blood tests and possibly an X-ray to rule out any other complications.”

### SYMPTOM SUDDEN SEVERE HEADACHE

**What it could be:** Most likely, it’s not a brain tumour, says Massage. “Headaches tend to be a late manifestation of brain tumours, not an early one, so the worst case scenario is that a sudden severe headache could be due to an aneurysm, stroke, a trauma from

being concussed, or meningitis. If you rarely get headaches and you suddenly get a severe one, see your doctor especially if the headache is unilateral – that is, it’s occurring on one side of the head – rather than bilateral and you’re experiencing visual disturbances, disorientation and severe nausea or vomiting. These can be signs of migraine – or something more severe, so you need immediate attention.”

**What it probably is:** “The most common cause of headaches is tension, stress and the like,” says Massage. “Headaches can also be caused by sinusitis, infections and vision problems.”

### SYMPTOM CHRONIC THRUSH

**What it could be:** “Thrush is really common but if it’s recurring all the time it could be an underlying cause of diabetes, auto-immune deficiency or, in a woman who’s high risk, HIV,” says Swaraj. “Cushing’s syndrome, where you produce too much cortisol, is another cause of chronic thrush.”

**What it probably is:** Dietary issues are possible causes, says Swaraj. “But one of the mistakes is people go to nutritionists and homeopaths to fix it. I’ve got no problem with that, but you also need to see your GP and have a simple blood test to make sure nothing else is amiss.” ❖