

## **From Chinese tea to the strongest drug - one writer spent 13 years searching for a cure, and then stumbled upon a remedy by accident**

*BY JACKIE ANNESLEY of Evening Standards*

NAME the pleasure — a few glasses of wine, a lie in, the first day of a holiday — and the punishment came swiftly in the form of a faint, dull ache somewhere in my head. Then the pain would gather itself and creep towards the back of my left eye. And there it would sit like some craven parasite, dispensing its agony over the next three days. Comparatively mild in the first 24 hours, the pain became eye-wincingly vicious on day two, the sort that leaves you grey and wanting to escape back to a dark bedroom. This would only tail off towards the end of the 72-hour marathon, when it would finally depart, leaving what felt like a bruise in its place.

Migraines. They blighted my life for 13 years, a black cloud over an otherwise happy existence. I came to dread their arrival and resent their hold over me. But after having suffered them for all this time, in the early days every couple of months but, in recent years, as often as every three weeks, and wasted many thousands of pounds searching for a cure, I may, just may, have found a way of managing them. It is a machine that massages your body by making it move like a fish (see box).

Bizarre, I know, but this "Zen Chi" massager can be found in most Pilates studios in London, the Australians use it in their hospitals to treat chronic circulation problems and I now genuflect to it nightly in the hope that my unprecedented three months of being migraine-free will continue.

To appreciate the magnitude of what this means, you have to realise the huge impact migraines have on the lives of those who suffer them. The World Health Organisation ranks migraine as one of the top 20 causes of years of healthy life lost to disability. And yet surely in the 21st century, there must be a pill you can pop to stop a migraine?

Of course there is a huge array of over-the-counter medicines and when I inexplicably began suffering from them in my early thirties, they were the first things I tried. None of them came close to giving me relief. A visit to the doctor came next, for something harder. Imigran was the strongest drug available. I vividly remember the reaction of the chemist, near my Ladbroke Grove home, who handed over my prescription. "Do you know how much each of these pills cost?" he said. "£13!"

No wonder the NHS doctor only prescribed six. I went home, swallowed one and within half an hour was flat on my back with the uncomfortable feeling of something squeezing my neck. A common side effect apparently, along with nausea and extreme tiredness. Great. Over the years, I'd revert to Imigran in desperation because the pills did dull the pain, but it is a horrible medicine.

And so began my long search for a cure in the world of alternative medicine.

There was the Chelsea nutritionist whom I saw on TV recently, who gave me a list of food triggers that included everything from chocolate and alcohol to bacon, tomatoes, pulses and even milk. I religiously gave them up, became a food bore and still the migraines came.

Next I tried the Shepherd's Bush homeopath, an elderly gentleman who lived in a house full of plants and who gladly took my £50 in exchange for a tiny buff envelope full of pills that tasted of sugar. Went back twice, got more migraines and moved on.

The Chinese herbal medicine man at the Hale Clinic in the West End said something about the heat in my body and my bad liver and, surprise, surprise, offered up some vile bitter tea (Chinese herbalists always prescribe vile bitter tea). My migraines were having none of it. In despair, I went back to my GP who recommended I see a private neurologist at Charing Cross hospital. He was, in short, getting me off his back.

During my consultation I managed to lean over and read a few lines of the covering letter from my GP on his desk. "She claims it is interfering with her 'ability to work!'" To him it was all a joke, and the consultant wasn't much more helpful. I left with a handful of very mild sedatives he recommended I take daily. "They're the sort businessmen take when they get anxious before a meeting," he told me.

In fact, despite the fact that there are 10 million migraine sufferers in the UK, many doctors don't take the condition seriously, dismissing them as neurotic complainers who can't handle stress.

Was I becoming neurotic? Van Gogh, Julius Caesar and Elvis Presley had all been fellow sufferers and look how mad they were. I admit that as my migraines became increasingly frequent — every three weeks, lasting three days and increasingly severe — I felt they were making me mad — to the extent that I would fantasise about how much money I would pay someone to be guaranteed a life free from migraine pain. I remember thinking that £50,000 would be well worth it.

CHRISTMASES, holidays, parties, birthdays — any special event would be preceded by a fear that a migraine would ruin the day. I was paranoid I'd get one on my wedding day in 1997. In the event it came during our honeymoon in the Indian jungles of northern Kerala where I optimistically parted with 100 rupees (£1.60 and the cheapest treatment yet) for some Ayurvedic potion in a bid to cure it. It didn't work.

And then I found something failsafe that really did work, the catch being it's a hard one to follow on a regular basis. Four months into my first pregnancy, the migraines disappeared. Relaxin, the hormone that softens ligaments in pregnant women, had kicked in. Whatever relaxin was doing to the blood vessels in my head (see migraine box overleaf), it worked and what utter joy it was. Out went the boring diet and in came the boxes of Magnum ice creams and bacon sarnies.

Of course it was not to last. I put on three stone and the migraines were back within weeks of giving birth. Now both fat and in pain, I resumed my willingness to try anything, conventional and alternative.

There is a drawer in our kitchen rattling with half-empty promises — feverfew, Coenzyme Q10, magnesium, vitamin B, all claiming to be the mag

## **How does a Zen Chi massager work?**

YOU lie with your back on the floor and pop your feet in the Zen Chi's cradle. When switched on, the cradle moves rapidly from side to side, making your body simulate the motion of a swimming fish by producing a rocking movement that travels up the length of your body in waves. Apparently "kinetic" energy is transferred through the body, and the trunk-rocking exercise helps circulation, digestion and can strengthen the muscles around the spine. The brochure makes no mention of claiming to help migraines or headaches. However, it appears to oxygenate you - when the session stops, you feel the most amazing tingling sensation throughout your body. The massager can be used up to twice a day for a maximum of 15 minutes each time. What's more, it will never tell you it is too tired.

For further information, see <http://www.stressreliefcentre.com> or [www.earthq.co.uk](http://www.earthq.co.uk) Click on home page, scroll to the bottom of the page and click on Zen Chi Massage.

Over the years, I've had a CAT scan at the London Clinic to rule out a brain tumour, been encouraged to buy umpteen Australian flower tincture by a blonde osteopath in Marylebone, had regular shiatsu massage, persuaded my husband to give me two more children, been pricked with needles in the most unlikely places by an acupuncturist on Portobello road, had a bit of cranial osteopathy, and suffered months of stomach-crunching, ligament-lengthening Pilates at £50 a lesson. It was there in a west London Pilates studio that I first tried the Zen Chi machine. I'd been doing Pilates for three months by then and suffered two of my worst migraines ever. I'd eyed up the machine during class, but never had time to use it. I lay on the floor, put my feet in the Zen Chi's cradle and switched the machine on. It felt weird yet wonderfully calming, unlocking my tight shoulders, as if I'd just had a total body massage. I gave up the classes and bought my own machine for about £150 on the web.

Will it really continue to contain my migraines? My theory is that I get them when I am tense and then relax. This little machine helps me to stay physically loose and relaxed on a daily basis, which is probably why it's proved more successful than anything else I've tried. And if wriggling like a fish fails me? Although I know someone who may not agree, there is always the temporary relief to be found in having a fourth baby.

## **What is a migraine?**

A MIGRAINE is not a bad headache. In a significant way, it is quite the opposite. Migraine pain is caused by vasodilation (expansion) of the cranial blood vessels, while a headache is caused by vasoconstriction, or narrowing of them.

During a migraine, inflammation of the tissue surrounding the brain, exacerbates the pain provoking symptoms that include vomiting, numbness, sensitivity to light and sound, and severe pain on one side of the head. One attack can last several days or weeks. They are induced by triggers that cause vasodilation of the cranial blood vessels. These include weather patterns (wind from the southeast, according to one Canadian study), menstrual cycles, bright lights, alcohol and various foods, such as cheese and chocolate. There is no known cure for migraine, only treatments for the symptoms.