

When the heart rules the head

In some cases, a headache can be a sign of problems with the heart, writes ANEETA SUNDARARAJ

IT starts with a throbbing headache that progresses to nausea and a feeling of dizziness. Soon, your vision is affected. All you want to do is draw the curtains, get into bed and sleep.

Perhaps there is something wrong with your heart, says Dr Yap Yee Guan, Prince Court Medical Centre's consultant interventional cardiologist.

To understand the connection between your heart and your headache, Dr Yap says it's necessary to know the structure

and function of the heart: "The heart consists of four chambers — the left and right atria and the left and right ventricles. The muscle that divides the right and left sides is called the septum."

In a normal, healthy heart, deoxygenated blood moves through the right atrium to the right ventricle. It then flows to the lungs to be oxygenated. Oxygenated blood flows back into the left atrium. From there it goes into the left ventricle and, finally, to the rest of the body.

In foetuses, this is not how

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— Dr Yap Yee Guan



it works. As the lungs are not developed, the oxygenated blood flows from the placenta through the umbilical cord directly into the right atrium. Then, it takes a short cut and goes to the left atrium through a little gap known as "Foramen ovale". This gap usually closes upon birth. When it does not, it creates a condition called Patent Foramen Ovale (PFO). For most people who have PFO, nothing usually happens.

"Problems start when there is too much pressure on the heart and deoxygenated blood goes directly from the right atrium to the left atrium. This blood can carry clots and substances not filtered by the lungs. They, in turn, will reduce or obstruct blood flow to the brain causing migraines with aura or a stroke," adds Dr Yap.

But not every patient who has migraine will have a problem with his heart. If a patient is

just suffering from migraine, he will probably suggest more conventional treatment options.

When does he suspect something is wrong with a person's heart? "When the patients I see are young (under 40) and have suffered what's called a cryptogenic stroke — where the stroke occurs for no apparent reason (usual reasons are smoking, hypertension, diabetes or high cholesterol)."

Dr Yap adds: "I also see patients who are diagnosed with migraine with aura. A migraine with aura is a severe form of migraine where the patient not only has a throbbing headache, but suffers from vertigo, dizziness, nausea and sees flashes of light.

"The surgery is quite simple. We will insert a catheter into an artery through a small incision at the groin. When the catheter is in position, the device is slowly pushed out of the catheter until the discs sit on either side of the

PFO defect (like a sandwich) on either side of the atrial septum. Then, the catheter is removed. Over time, heart tissue grows over the implant and becomes part of the heart."

The device that Dr Yap mentions is called an "implantable Amplatzer PFO Occluder". In simple terms, it is a small wire mesh of double discs that resemble a tiny two-sided umbrella when open. It is made from Nitinol, which is a combination of nickel and titanium.

Hospitalisation for this procedure is for a maximum of one week. In most cases, patients do not balk at the RM36,000 price tag attached to this procedure as they will no longer suffer from debilitating migraines. Nevertheless, Dr Yap concludes: "It's not just the migraines issue. More importantly, this procedure reduces the risk of the patient developing another stroke."

Life paralysed by migraine

THE smile on the faces of Mohammad Noor Mohamad Ishak, 47 and his family belie the trauma they've been through. "I had my first stroke in 2005. I was only 39 then," says the legal advisor in a multinational firm.

"Our life was so stressful," adds his wife, Roslina Mohd Yatim, 47.

The housewife explains that after the stroke, her husband could not move or drive. "Sometimes, he couldn't even talk. But I was not going to allow him to stay inside the house. Every day, I would take him for a walk.

"I always encouraged his friends to visit him. Sometimes, he didn't even know who they were. So, I used to keep a list of all the people who came. When my husband recovered, I showed him this list. He was so happy and said to me, 'People like me. I must be a good man'."

Mohammad Noor went back to work after his recovery but life was no longer the same. "Many times, I had to take medical leave because of migraine," he says. "Once, I even fainted in the office. I also stopped

playing golf."

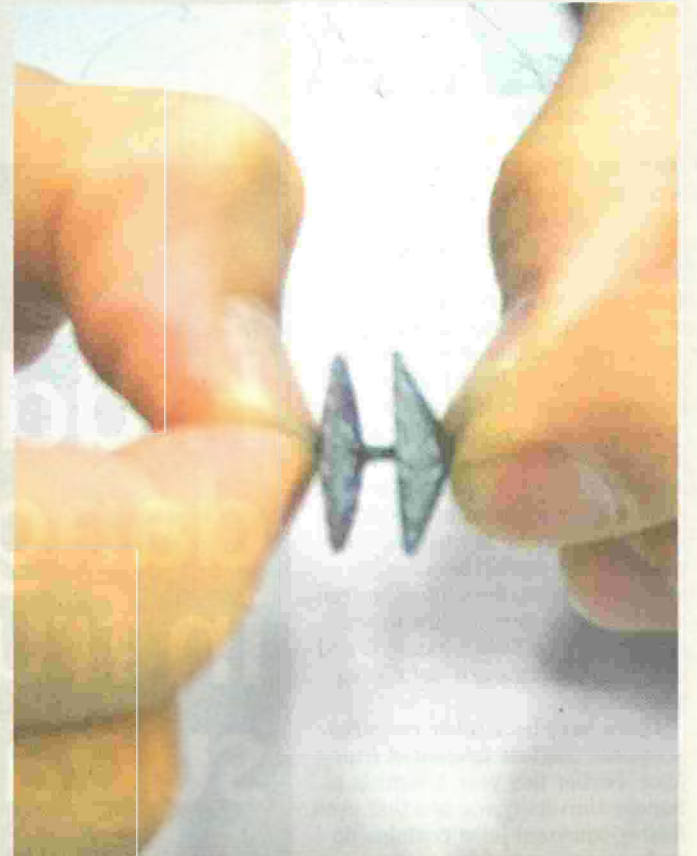
Roslina adds: "One night, he woke me up at 2am to massage his head because the pain was so bad. I wondered if things would ever get better."

Then, earlier this year, the situation became unbearable. He had a terrible migraine every single day in April. By May, he could barely see and felt as though, "a portion of my head had been snapped." The pain was so debilitating that he barely made it to Dr Yap's consultation room.

"Now, after the operation, things are so much better. I have no more migraines and we can all sleep peacefully at night," he says.

His wife adds: "We have laughter back in the house."

Nothing underlies the happiness this family feels and its renewed quality of life than the broad smile their youngest child, Mohammad Imran, 14, gives. He says it all: "Now, we watch football together and he can help me with my homework. My father has time for us now."



Implantable AmplatzerR PFO Occluder



Challenge to lower cholesterol

ZUHAILA SEDEK

NASI lemak, teh tarik and curry laksa are Yap Lai Keng's favourite food. But with a cholesterol level of 5.8, Yap realises that this will keep increasing if she continues to indulge in such foods.

This month, Yap and 29 contestants of the Nestlé Omega Plus 30 Days Cholesterol Challenge, will strive to lower their cholesterol levels by drinking two glasses of Nestlé Omega Plus milk, eating healthily and exercising.

"I used to eat two portions of nasi lemak and teh tarik for breakfast," says Yap, 53. She is slim, proof that cholesterol can affect anyone, regardless of their body size.

Nestlé Omega Plus contains added plant sterols called ActiCol. This ingredient has been clinically proven to help lower cholesterol levels. "When it comes to milk, I only like condensed milk and this has to change. I hope the challenge will bear fruit," she says.

If Yap is successful in lowering her cholesterol to healthy levels, she may be among the top 20 achievers who will receive RM500 as an incentive.

Her determination to reduce her cholesterol level came about after a medical check up. "I am getting older and I can't imagine what will happen to my family and me if I fall sick," says the mother of two.

Yap, who also does some light exercises, is trying her best to curb her unhealthy eating habits. "Let's wait till the end of the month," she says.

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