Primary Stabbing Headache

Neurosciences Directorate
This common headache disorder is also known as idiopathic stabbing headache, ‘jabs and jolts’, or ice pick headache. It is a primary headache disorder, meaning that the headache itself is the underlying problem, and that there is no other head and neck disease causing it. Migraine and tension type headache are other examples of primary headache disorders, and primary stabbing headache may occur in patients who also have these types of headache, as well as independently.

The headache is characterised by shortlived but severe stabs of pain, usually lasting between 1 second and 30 seconds each. The pain may be repeated only rarely, or occur on a daily basis; even many times in a day. The pain may move about but is most often felt in or behind the eyes, the temple or the side of the head. The stabs may be single, or occur as a repeated volley of pains.

There is no diagnostic test for this type of headache, and the diagnosis therefore relies on the patient’s description of the typical headache features above. Similar headache disorders with which primary stabbing headache may be confused include paroxysmal hemicrania, trigeminal neuralgia, occipital neuralgia and the rare SUNCT syndrome.

Often primary stabbing headache will not require any treatment, especially if it is infrequent. Painkillers are not helpful as the pains are so brief. Studies indicate that indometacin tablets (a prescription-only non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug) taken regularly for prevention is the most useful treatment, but is likely to be reserved for severe cases.