

## Fit & Well

# When is a scary symptom NOT SCARY?

Most of the time, you'll be glad to hear!

**A** recent survey shows one in four of us mistakenly believes we have a serious condition after looking up our symptoms online. But most scary symptoms are really nothing to worry about...

### Shaky hands

**IT'S PROBABLY JUST...** caused by stress, anxiety, caffeine, nicotine or a drop in blood sugar levels. These can all produce a tremor, as can alcohol withdrawal after a night of drinking. To avoid dips in blood sugar, eat regularly. And cut back on alcohol and caffeine – try herbal teas or decaffeinated coffee. **BUT SEE YOUR GP IF...** your symptoms persist and interfere with your ability to do everyday things. In rare cases, shaky hands can be a symptom of neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease. 'Your GP will undertake an assessment, blood tests and possible referral to a neurologist,' says Dr Mayank Shah, a GP at BMI Clementine Churchill Hospital, Middlesex.

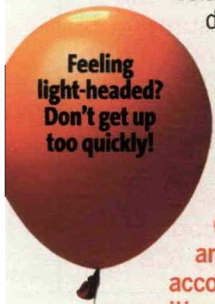


nothing to worry about...

**Dizzy spells**

**IT'S PROBABLY JUST...** a variety of non-threatening factors. Anything from dehydration to lack of sleep can make you feel light-headed. 'Many dizzy spells are caused by a drop in blood pressure, which leads to a reduction in the blood supply to the brain. This can even happen when you get up quickly from sitting down,' says Dr Kim Thomas of **camomilemedical.co.uk**

WORDS KIM JONES PHOTOGRAPHS GETTY (POSED BY MODEL)



'Vertigo-type dizziness, where the room feels like it's spinning, can result from inflammation of the inner ear after an infection or cold.' **BUT SEE YOUR GP IF...** 'The spells are persistent and accompanied by nausea, vomiting, blurred vision or blackouts,' says Dr Thomas. 'Your GP will perform a full neurological examination and may refer you for tests.'

## Burning pain in chest

**IT'S PROBABLY JUST...** heartburn or indigestion, caused by acid reflux in the stomach. Try taking an antacid preparation, or just drink a stomach-soothing glass of milk to help ease the problem. Other causes of chest pain could be a chest infection or muscular strain – have you been working out too vigorously lately?

**BUT SEE YOUR GP IF...** 'The chest pain is a tightening or squeezing type of pain, especially if associated with pain spreading to the neck or arm, sweating or shortness of breath. This requires immediate assessment, so dial 999 for an urgent hospital transfer,' says Dr Mayank Shah.

## Calf pain

**IT'S PROBABLY JUST...** a routine ache. 'Calf pain may be due to muscular strain, referred pain from the back, hip or knee or from varicose veins,' says Dr Mayank Shah. 'Treatment depends on the cause but take painkillers first.' To ease the pain of varicose veins, don't stand up or sit in the same position for long periods, says nutritional therapist Ali Cullen. 'Avoid hot baths – give your legs a cold shower instead.' And invest in support tights. Visit [www.activahealthcare.co.uk](http://www.activahealthcare.co.uk) for 'compression hosiery' or call 08450 606 707 for a copy of its leaflet, *Taking Care Of Your Legs*.

**41%** of heartburn sufferers had symptoms so painful they thought they were having a heart attack, says a survey by Zantac.

**BUT SEE YOUR GP IF...** pain is localised in one calf, with swelling, tenderness and skin that feels hot to touch. 'This may be a deep vein thrombosis,' says Dr Shah. If symptoms are accompanied by a cough or shortness of breath, you could have a pulmonary embolism – a blocked blood vessel in the lung. Attend an A&E Department for urgent assessment.



## Lump on neck

### IT'S PROBABLY JUST...

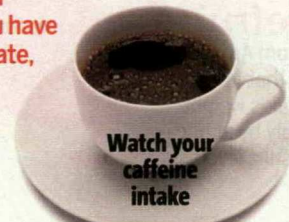
a sebaceous cyst or fatty lump (lipoma). Both are harmless and require no treatment unless they're unsightly or become painful, when they can be removed under local anaesthetic. Other causes could be a swollen lymph gland, due to a throat infection or tonsillitis.

**BUT SEE YOUR GP IF...** 'The lump in the neck persists beyond a week or is associated with other symptoms, such as a persistent cough, weight loss, night sweats and a hoarse voice,' says Dr Shah. In rare cases, swollen lymph glands can be a sign of throat cancer or cancer of the lymphatic system and blood – lymphomas and leukaemia.

## Palpitations

**IT'S PROBABLY JUST...** caused by exercise. 'Short-lived speeding of your heartbeat is common, and normal after strenuous activities,' says Dr Shah. 'Other causes include anxiety, stress, caffeine, nicotine and certain medications. It normally settles within a few minutes.' Simple measures, such as reducing caffeine and nicotine and reviewing regular medications, should solve the problem.

**BUT SEE YOUR GP IF...** your symptoms persist and recur. A rapid heartbeat could be a sign that you're anaemic or have an overactive thyroid gland. Irregular heartbeats can be harmless but it's best to get them checked out. Treatments can include drugs, making lifestyle changes or surgical intervention. 'Call 999 if you have prolonged speeding heart rate, especially if you also have chest pain, difficulty with breathing or feeling faint,' says Dr Shah.



## Skin lesions

### IT'S PROBABLY JUST...

a bit unsightly. Skin lesions, skin tags, warts and moles don't usually cause any problems but can be removed by surgical or chemical procedures. 'Any spots that are filled with pus or have white heads are generally harmless,' says Dr Thomas.

**BUT SEE YOUR GP IF...** 'You have a patch of skin, such as a scab, that's been there some time without healing or has turned red, crusty and flaky. It could be sun-damaged skin, which can become cancerous,' says Dr Thomas. 'Treatment may include cryotherapy (freezing) of the area or excision.' Also, watch for changes in freckles or moles, adds Dr Thomas. 'If a mole becomes bigger, raised, with different shades of colour, or if it's itchy or bleeding, a specialist will need to examine it.'

## The dangers of playing doctor

**The sale of health self-testing kits is on the rise, but a new report suggests they can do more harm than good...**

Once, only a medical expert could give you a test for bowel cancer, prostate problems, diabetes, high cholesterol, stomach ulcers and urinary tract infections. Now, all it takes is a quick trip to the chemist and you can do the test yourself.

However, a recent report compiled by consumer organisation *Which?* reveals that home test kits can be 'confusing, offer false reassurance and trigger false alarms.'

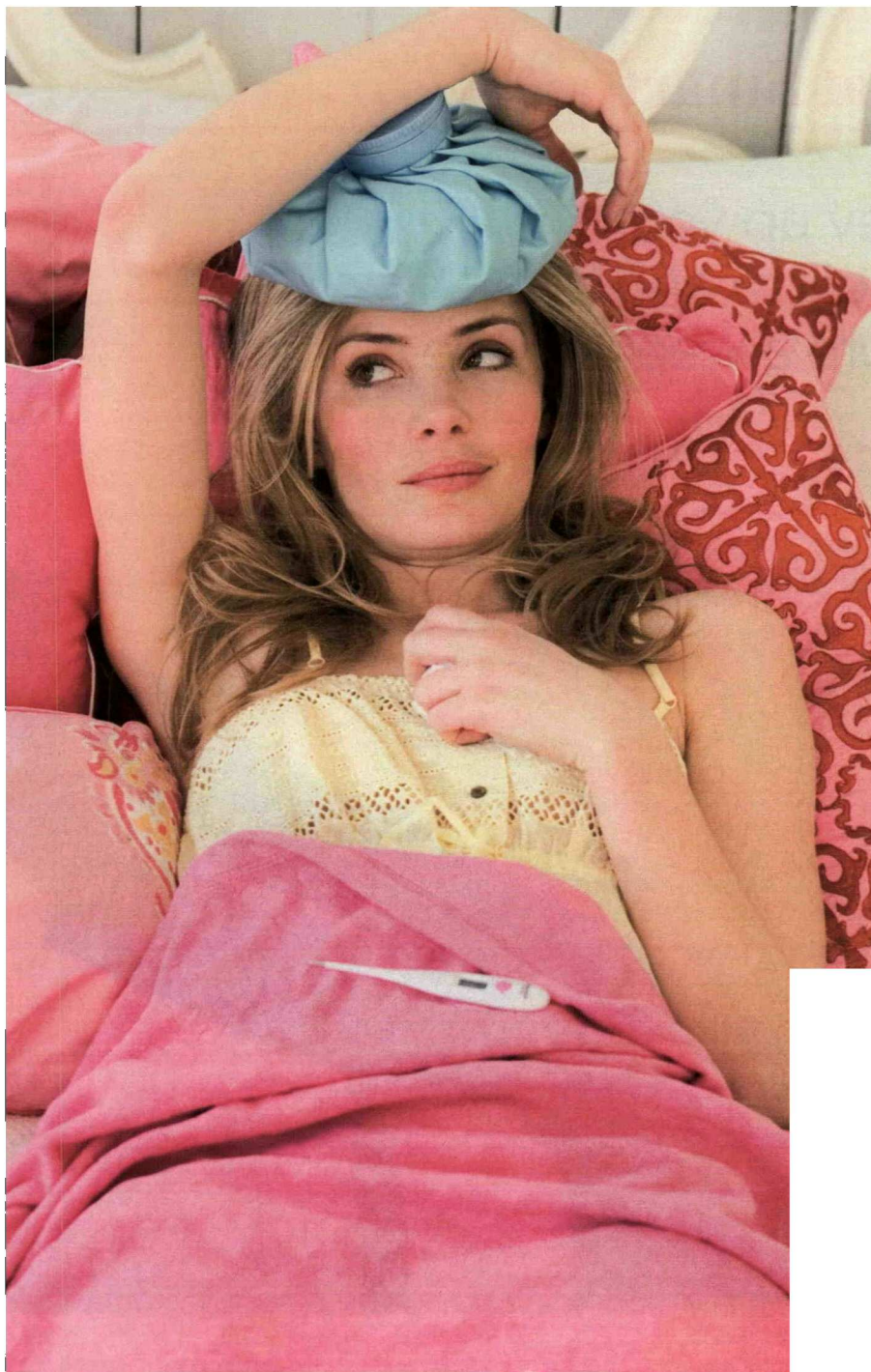
The report concludes that if you have any worrying symptoms, it's best to save your money and go to your GP. After all, even if you make a positive self-diagnosis, you'll still need to have it confirmed by your doctor.

The Prostate Cancer Charity, Cancer Research UK and Diabetes UK agree that DIY tests are not ideal, and the

Department of Health says: 'Anyone who's concerned they're suffering from an illness or infection should immediately contact their GP, pharmacist or other health professional for advice.'

**90%**  
of breast lumps are benign and perfectly harmless, but always get them checked by your GP.

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Have you scared  
yourself back to  
bed with an  
imaginary  
illness?