

# Signs of a brain tumour

Generalised headaches that do not respond to over-the-counter medications could point to a brain tumour, says consultant neurosurgeon Ng Zhi Xu

It may come as a surprise but there are many types of tumours that can occur in the head and brain. This is because the brain is made up of many structures and different types of cells. As it is also an organ that receives a large supply of blood, it is not uncommon for tumours to spread to the brain through the blood vessels. Consultant neurosurgeon Ng Zhi Xu explains brain tumour symptoms and how to differentiate a regular headache from a tumour-linked one.

## Q What are some common types of brain tumours and what causes them?

We classify tumours into benign and malignant types. For benign brain tumours, the common ones are meningiomas, which occur in the coverings of the brain. These tend to be slow growing but can compress critical structures of the brain and result in neurological issues like weakness or blindness.

Another common benign brain tumour is known as pituitary adenoma. The pituitary gland is the part of the brain that produces multiple hormones to control bodily functions. It is located behind and between our eyes and optic nerves and, due to its location, can cause hormonal changes or affect a person's vision.

Malignant tumours are fast-growing, aggressive and tend to invade into other tissues and spread to other organs. The most common cause of these tumours in the brain is when an existing cancer spreads there. Lung, breast, colorectal and renal cancers all have the potential to spread to the brain and cause tumour growth in multiple areas. The most common form of malignant tumour arising from the brain itself is glioblastoma. These tumours can grow and spread quickly and early treatment is recommended. Treatment for aggressive malignant brain tumours involves a combination of surgery with chemotherapy and radiotherapy.



If there is a change in the frequency, severity, location, or duration of your headaches, it would be helpful to consult your doctor to rule out other causes. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

## Q What are some symptoms and how can I tell a regular headache from a tumour-related one?

The most common symptom of a brain tumour is a headache, often felt throughout the head rather than in one specific area. These headaches are usually more severe, and may not respond to over-the-counter pain medications. Conversely, other headaches like migraines are usually one-sided and can be triggered by certain foods such as chocolates and wine, or hormonal changes during the menstrual cycle.

Sometimes it may be difficult to differentiate the headaches. If there is a change in the characteristics of your usual headaches like a different location, frequency, severity or duration, it would be good to seek a medical review to rule out other causes. Any new neurological symptoms like weakness, blurred vision or blindness should also be investigated promptly and thoroughly.

Depending on the brain tumour's location, symptoms could include seizures and sudden changes to speech like slurring or difficulty in finding words.

## Q Who are more likely to get brain tumours and what are the risk factors involved?

There are a few genetic conditions that can predispose a person to having brain tumours. Some examples are Turcot syndrome, Von Hippel-Lindau disease and neurofibromatosis, which is a disorder that causes tumours to form throughout the body. However, a majority of brain tumours that occur may not be genetically related. If there is prolonged exposure to carcinogens like cigarette smoke, there is also a higher risk of developing tumours.



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