

By **Jessie Hewitson**

It's the end of a long day and you settle down in front of the TV. But as soon as you sink into the sofa, you feel a powerful urge to move your legs. When you do, the feeling goes away, only to return moments later when your legs start twitching.

The only way to alleviate the problem is by walking around – but the sensation always comes back.

If this sounds familiar, you may be suffering from Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS). A study in 2003 by the Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation found that 15 per cent of people in the UK are affected. Most sufferers are female and notice the condition mainly in the evening. Pregnant women are more likely to suffer and many find the symptoms disappear when the baby arrives.

The condition has a strong genetic streak: if you have RLS, the chances are a sibling or parent will too. In my family, my grandmother had it, as do my mother, aunt, two cousins and I. Childhood TV-viewing was constantly interrupted by my mother, whose legs would jump at regular intervals. Now I watch in dismay as mine do the same.

It is a condition that ranges in severity. Some, like me, will get it occasionally and their lives will not be too affected; others, like my mother, are at the more severe end of the scale and will be unable to sit through a film or play as the twitching will spoil their enjoyment (as well as the peace of those sitting around them).

Perhaps the worst part for many sufferers is that their sleep is interrupted. Some wake several times a night and need to walk around to alleviate the symptoms.

'The problem lies with the brain messages being sent to the legs and not with the legs themselves,' says Dr Katie Sidle, consultant neurologist at London's Whittington Hospital and the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery.

'The brain produces dopamine, which acts as a messenger for a number of cell receptors. There are different sorts of receptors, however, and while dopamine can act as a stimulant if it reaches some of them, in others it can inhibit movement.'

'If someone has RLS it may mean that the receptors responsible for inhibiting movement are blocked, causing too much movement in the legs.'

Neurologist Dr Chris Everett, of St Bartholomew's, agrees.

'There is certainly something going on in the brain to do with the control of movement among RLS sufferers but quite why and what is happening to the body is

not really known. It is early days in terms of researching RLS.'

Certain factors are known triggers, including iron deficiency and altered dopamine levels. The condition can also be a side effect of commonly used medicines such as cold and flu remedies, antihistamines and drugs used to treat nausea, depression and schizophrenia.

Dr Eric Asher, medical director of the Third Space health and fitness club in London, says: 'A deficiency in folic acid, magnesium and particularly iron may be an issue, and varicose veins, diabetes and thyroid diseases are all associated with some people who have RLS.'

'If you have under-treated diabetes or thyroid problems, then treating them will help the RLS, for example.'

Pharmacist Janice Wilson highlights the role of dopamine – a neurotransmitter produced by the body allowing nerve cells to communicate with each other and governing movement and sleep.

She says: 'When I started researching the subject I felt everyone was concentrating on the role of iron, but my reading of the condition showed that RLS is also to do with dopamine.'

It is the role of dopamine that some pharmaceutical companies have been focusing on, developing pills that can be taken by those who have been affected severely by RLS. Anti-Parkinson's disease and anti-epileptic medication, including Valium-like drugs, can be prescribed, but they may not be a long-term solution.

Dr Asher says: 'Seventy per cent of users of Valium-type drugs will have withdrawal symptoms, which may again cause RLS. I think there are many people on medication who should actually have the causes treated. So if you're deficient in iron, get that treated by consulting a doctor, and treating varicose veins, if you have them, will definitely help.'

There are also natural remedies. Janice Wilson is marketing her own vitalCALM, made from an extract of Klamath blue-green algae, rich in PEA, a substance also produced in the body, and phycocyanin, a potent antioxidant. Together, she believes, these substances improve dopamine functioning.

Other treatments include increasing your intake of magnesium and iron, after consulting your doctor. Avoiding caffeine can help, too.

My mother, Jean Hewitson, a 64-year-old retired kitchen designer, has suffered restless legs all her life. She says: 'I don't remember a time when I didn't have them, and it gets worse with age. I'd describe it as an

achy feeling, then your legs start jumping and you just don't know where to put them.'

'I have it every night. I've tried taking magnesium, potassium and calcium tablets, which did help, but not massively.'

'The worst time for me is at the theatre as you have no room to stretch your legs. Two years ago I went to the doctor and she prescribed Clonazepam, a drug offered to epilepsy sufferers. I went to the opera with a friend and just before

the interval I could feel a twitch coming on. I took two pills – and promptly fell into a deep sleep.'

'My friend couldn't wake me. I slept through the interval and the entire second half.'

She adds: 'It's an absolute curse. You live with it, and people laugh, but they don't realise how uncomfortable it is.'

● *Have you suffered from RLS but found a remedy? If so, please email health@mailonsunday.co.uk.*

Does Restless Legs Syndrome keep you awake at night? Blame your mum



BETWITCHED: Jessie and her mother Jean are both plagued by restless legs

DOCTOR DOCTOR

Q How can I find out what vaccines I had as a child? My mother cannot recall.

A The GP practice you are registered with will have all your records since birth. Your notes, including immunisation records, should be available for a doctor or nurse to check.

Feel tense and prone to headaches? Give your jaw a rest

Over the past two weeks I've been sharing ways of relieving tension in the upper back and neck areas that are often caused by desk work, stress and poor posture. This week I'll focus on the jaw area.

Many people hold tension around the jaw without realising and grind their teeth at night. This is known medically as bruxism, from the Greek for 'gnashing of teeth'.

It affects about one in four adults – and if you wake with an aching jaw and

headaches, and suffer from swollen gums and even chipped or cracked teeth, this could be the cause.

The pressure on the teeth during grinding can be 20 times greater than in normal chewing and biting. Doctors believe bruxism is the result of stress.

And with the extreme cold weather, chattering teeth and shivering can also overwork the muscles around the jaw and neck, leading to tension headaches.

When you shiver, the movements are small, and while shivering is the body's

By **Gillian Reeves**

PERSONAL TRAINER

way of keeping warm, working the muscles through a small range of movement means they will become tight if not properly stretched afterwards.

To avoid tension around your jaw, just carry out this exercise, which works by stretching the three major muscles that control chewing as well as the many tiny muscles in the rest of the face. Obviously this is not a cure for bruxism – and if you are suffering from regular headaches, visit your doctor – but it will help to release any built-up stress in the jaw.

Start by opening your mouth as wide as it will go and hold for five seconds. Then, to take the muscles through a full range of movement, contract them by closing your mouth and eyes and making your face as small as you can – in the picture our model's face is scrunched up as if she has just sucked a lemon.

Repeat this ten times, ideally in a place where you're comfortable so you don't feel silly.

While you're doing this, or afterwards, to aid relaxation you can try making light circles around the jawline using the index and middle fingers together.

Self-massage like this is particularly helpful in relaxing face muscles. If you know you grind your teeth at night, perform this exercise before you go to bed. Finally, when relaxed there should be a small gap between your upper and lower jaw – so make sure when resting that your mouth is not clenched shut.

● *For more information about personal training visit www.virginactive.co.uk.*

