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Is this normal

We all experience body oddities that provoke temporary panic while we wonder if we're okay (or about to bite the dust!). Here, doctors weigh in on which issues are probably safe to ignore and when you should get checked out.

BY KATE ROCKWOOD

The human body is truly a wonder, with complex systems and exquisite sensitivities – but even the most well-crafted machines have glitches now and then. You've probably experienced at least one of these “that's weird...” moments, such as when your eye twitches a little more than usual or you sneeze when you're getting frisky. And anything slightly out of the ordinary when it comes to our body and our health can launch us into a frantic vortex of searching the internet and jumping to conclusions. To save you from a self-diagnosis spiral and hours spent ruminating, we asked medical professionals to explain what's behind some strange yet common physical phenomena – and when they warrant a trip to the doc.



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WHAT'S HAPPENING:

My hands
go numb
when I sleep

WHAT COULD CAUSE IT: If it's happening sporadically, there's a good chance that you might just be sleeping on your hands and cutting off their circulation. Other potential culprits could include "carpal tunnel syndrome, which affects the nerves in your wrist, or its cousin, cubital tunnel syndrome, which affects the ulnar nerve at your elbow," says hand surgeon Dr Karan Desai. Cervical spinal disease, in which the nerve roots are compressed at the spine, is also a possibility. "This is basically arthritis in the neck that squeezes the nerves that are coming out of your spine," he says.

WHAT TO DO: Occasional numbness is probably no big deal, so you can rest easy. However, "when it becomes frequent, that's when it's worrisome," Dr Desai says. The only way to know for sure what's going on is to speak to your doctor, who can perform a physical exam and potentially conduct a series of tests, including a nerve conduction study, to determine the source of the issue and match you with treatment to help you feel better. ▶

HEALTH CONCERNS ANSWERED

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**WHAT'S HAPPENING:**

Sometimes I feel a lightning bolt of pain go up my butt

WHAT COULD CAUSE IT: This is one of those scarily strange symptoms (talk about a shock to the system!) that are actually quite common: Up to 18 per cent of people experience proctalgia fugax, which is essentially just muscle cramps in the rectum and anus. Doctors aren't sure exactly what prompts these painful twinges, but they're more likely to occur after sex or haemorrhoid treatment, while constipated, during times of stress and (for those with a uterus) during a period. There is little available in the way of treatment, though, says obstetrician-gynaecologist Dr Aparna Sridhar, adding, "A trial of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen, can sometimes help alleviate the pain."

WHAT TO DO: Pop some ibuprofen if it occurs now and then, but definitely have a chat with your doctor if it's very painful and happens frequently, especially while you have your period or during sex. Your doctor may want to check to see if the issue is endometriosis, a serious but treatable condition that affects up to 10 per cent of women and girls of reproductive age worldwide – severe cramping and pain is a hallmark symptom.

WHAT'S HAPPENING:

I'm losing a lot of hair in the shower – like, a lot of hair!

WHAT COULD CAUSE IT: Have you been dealing with some tough times lately? If so, that may be the culprit. Stress is a common cause of hair loss, says dermatology physician's assistant Elina Ashirova. "Telogen effluvium is a specific type of hair loss caused by stress," she explains. "The stressor usually precedes hair loss by three to six months," and it can affect your eyebrows and eyelashes, too. Stress is a big factor, but you could also be losing hair due to "malnutrition, weight changes, hormonal imbalances, menopause, thyroid issues or iron-deficiency anaemia," she adds.

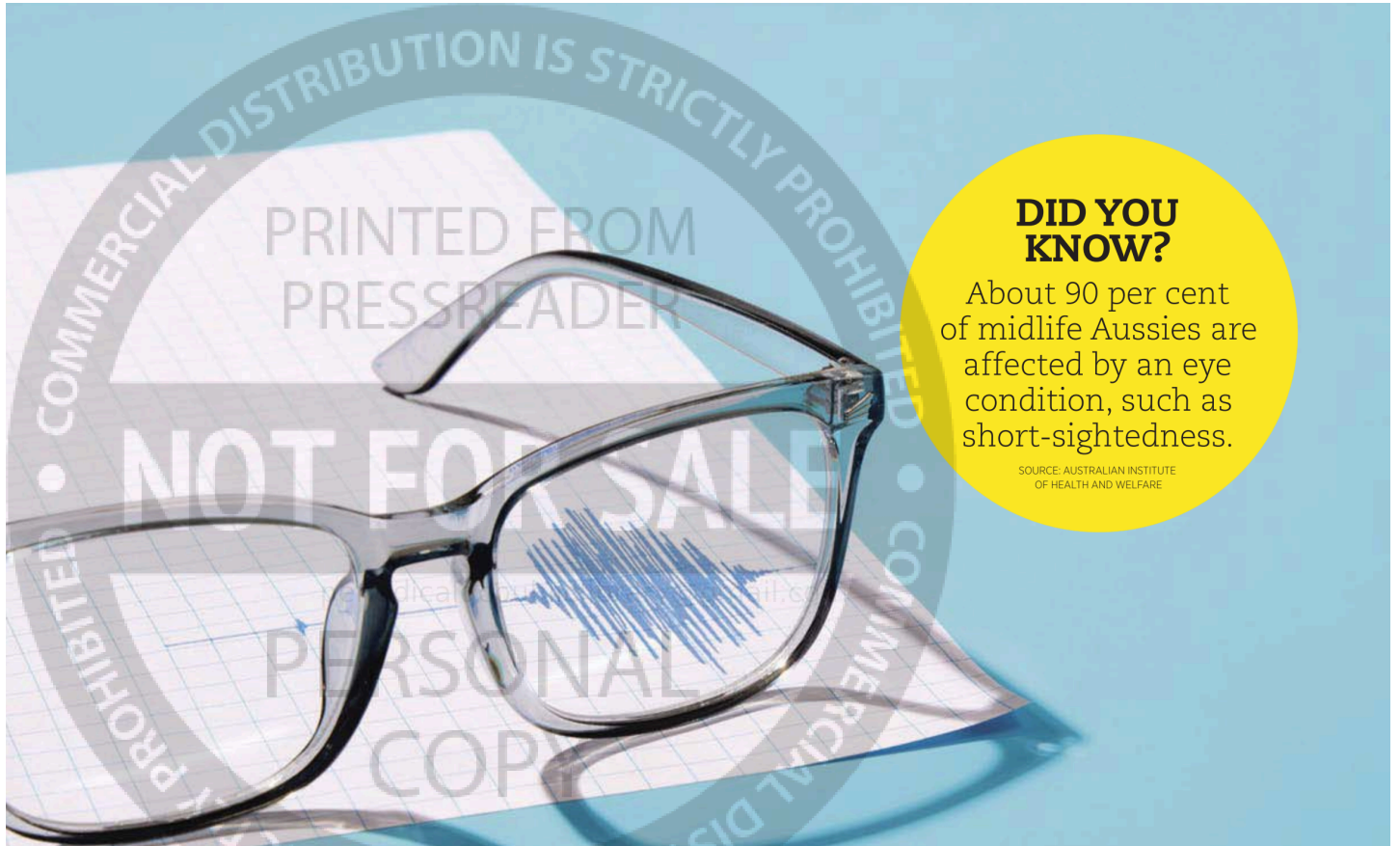
WHAT TO DO: Whether you could build your own pet out of all the lost hair or you've just been shedding more than usual, it's a good idea to tell your doctor and have your blood checked. Be sure to paint them a picture of any life issues in the past few months, like if you've been dealing with significant stress.

WHAT'S HAPPENING:

My underarms have got darker and darker

WHAT COULD CAUSE IT: Some people naturally have more pigment (melanin) in their skin, and people with certain racial or ethnic backgrounds are more prone to dark pigmentation in skin folds, such as under the arms or breasts and around the groin, Elina says. Darkening underarms could also be a reaction to deodorant, detergent or fabric that is irritating the skin, causing post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation, she adds.

WHAT TO DO: Any noticeable change in skin colour, whether on your underarms or elsewhere, is always worth investigating, Elina says. A dermatologist can help suggest alternative products if it turns out the change is exposure-induced (that is, from sunlight), and a doctor can run tests to see whether it may indicate something such as insulin resistance, type 2 diabetes or a hormonal issue.



DID YOU KNOW?

About 90 per cent of midlife Aussies are affected by an eye condition, such as short-sightedness.

SOURCE: AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF HEALTH AND WELFARE

What's happening:

My eyelid keeps twitching

WHAT COULD CAUSE IT: How often is it spasming?

An occasional eye twitch is common, especially when you're tired, stressed or over-caffeinated; this sporadic twitching is due to a benign condition known as eyelid myokymia. More frequent bouts of involuntary eye movement may fall into a category called blepharospasm (BSP), which can be triggered by anxiety, air pollution, allergens, bright lights, dry eye and fatigue, says plastic surgeon Dr Peter Lee.

WHAT TO DO: An occasional jumpy eyelid is totally normal, so try to just chill and let it go. But if you're dealing with uncontrolled movements in one or both eyes that last more than a couple of weeks or get worse over time, call your doctor, Dr Lee says – rarely, this may be a sign of a brain or nervous system disorder such as Bell's palsy, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease or Tourette's syndrome.

WHAT'S HAPPENING:

I sneeze when I'm aroused or after orgasm

WHAT COULD CAUSE IT: This may be embarrassing, but it's not as unusual as you might think, and it even has a clever nickname: honeymoon rhinitis. There's not much dedicated research on this underreported 'affliction' (though one older study review did find several anecdotal accounts in medical literature). "We don't know why this phenomenon occurs, but there are theories," says obstetrician-gynaecologist Dr Christine Greves. "For instance, it could be related to what happens when one's genitals become engorged and the nasal mucosa does the same." The study review attributed honeymoon rhinitis to the parasympathetic nervous system.

WHAT TO DO: If sex-related sneezing bothers you, it can't hurt to mention it to your doctor to exclude other causes (though keep in mind that they may not have much useful advice). The good news is that this health oddity isn't a symptom of any diseases, so that should at least ease your mind somewhat. ▶

HEALTH CONCERNS ANSWERED

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WHAT'S HAPPENING:

I have flu-like symptoms right before my period

WHAT COULD CAUSE IT: Fatigue, headaches, body aches, diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting, even a fever – all these are common symptoms of both the flu and premenstrual syndrome, or PMS. Most people associate PMS with emotional changes, sore breasts and bloating, but rapid hormonal shifts can also bring about these illness-mimicking symptoms. It all comes down to prostaglandins, or hormone-like lipids that make the uterus contract during menstruation; when levels of prostaglandins are high, that can cause a low-grade fever and other symptoms resembling the flu. "It's not a real virus; it just means you may definitely feel like you have one," says Dr Greves.

WHAT TO DO: It's not clear how many people suffer from the so-called 'period flu', but PMS, in general, is quite common, affecting about 90 per cent of those who menstruate. Luckily, these faux flu symptoms usually get better or disappear within a day or two, and for some they can be managed with an over-the-counter pain reliever such as acetaminophen. It may also be helpful to talk to your doctor about how you're feeling and ask about treatment options or lifestyle changes that may improve your symptoms such as eating an anti-inflammatory diet, taking hormonal birth control pills and upping your calcium intake.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

About 3000 tiny droplets of saliva are expelled in a single cough, so don't forget to cover it up!

WHAT'S HAPPENING:

Whenever I exercise outside, I start coughing

WHAT COULD CAUSE IT: Even if you've never been diagnosed with asthma, you may still fall victim to what's known as exercise-induced bronchoconstriction, which manifests in many of the same ways as asthma: coughing, shortness of breath, wheezing, chest tightness, fatigue and difficulty completing an outdoor workout. It happens when you breathe in a large amount of air that's cooler and drier than the air in your lungs and, in response, your airways constrict. This condition affects up to 90 per cent of people with asthma, but a significant percentage (up to 20 per cent) of those without asthma, too. "Sometimes coughing and difficulty breathing occur due to being out of shape, but after a couple of weeks of regular exercise, it should stop if that's the case," says allergist and immunologist Dr Hetu Parekh. "It's more likely to happen to people who already have asthma or in people who have outdoor allergies," Dr Parekh adds (hence the problem with being outside).

WHAT TO DO: If your outdoor-exercise coughing fits don't clear up, see your doctor – they may perform a spirometry, or a test of your lung function. They can also prescribe an oral inhaler to use as needed or a long-term inhaler, depending on your diagnosis.



What's happening:

My finger gets stuck, catches or pops when I try to bend it

WHAT COULD CAUSE IT: This common issue is known as trigger finger and most often occurs in people aged 40 to 60, explains Dr Desai, and it's "one of the most frequent conditions hand surgeons treat." It happens when the tendon that controls the digit swells and prevents it from sliding smoothly back into its protective sheath.

WHAT TO DO: Totally normal? Yes. Totally ignorable? Not always. Trigger finger may not get better on its own, so it's best to have it checked out. Sometimes it can be treated with splinting, stretching or steroid shots. If it happens very often, you may need minor surgery, but "you can use your hand the same day," Dr Desai says.

WHAT'S HAPPENING:

My nipples leak, and I'm not breastfeeding

WHAT COULD CAUSE IT: Galactorrhoea may sound like a cool sci-fi show, but it's actually the term for leaking of the nipples that's not due to pregnancy or breastfeeding. The condition is usually related to an overproduction of prolactin, the hormone that causes breasts to produce milk. Because prolactin is created by the brain's pituitary gland, leaky nipples may indicate a tumour in the area (usually a benign one), but such leaks can also be caused by medications such as birth control and antidepressants, by certain herbal supplements, or by overstimulation of the nipples or the breasts.

WHAT TO DO: Typically, galactorrhoea goes away without treatment, but if leaking persists for more than a few days, or if discharge from your nipples is bloody or dark yellow, tell your doctor about it. **P**



Trigger finger most often occurs in people aged 40 to 60 and is one of the most frequent conditions hand surgeons treat.