**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. This 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 did my mother; aunt, two cousins and a nephew. 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. She is able 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 for many sufferers is that their sleep is interrupted. Some wake several times a night and spend hours walking around to alleviate the symptoms.

The trouble comes with the brain messages being sent to the legs and not with those generated by, says Dr Katie Side, consultant neurologist at London’s Whittington Hospital and the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery. “The brain produces a 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 causes inhibitory movement.”

If someone has RLS it may mean that these dopamine receptors responsible for inhibiting movement are too 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 be a side effect of commonly used medicines such as cold and flu remedies, antihistamines, analgesics 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 folate, magnesium and particularly iron may be an issue, and von Willebrand’s disease is associated with some people who have RLS.”

If you have under-treatment of arthritis or thyroid problems, then treating them will help the RLS, for example. In one GP practice you are asked if you have any records since birth. Your notes, including immunisation records, should be available for a doctor or nurse to check.

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 EPA, 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, when 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 on 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 uncom fortable it is.”

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

Over the past two weeks I’ve been sharing ways of releasing 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 jaws.

Many people hold tension around the jaw without realising it. The muscles of the jaw are driven by the brain – less than a minute away. The muscles are small, and those that control the muscles of the mouth to help us make facial expressions. Over time, these small muscles in the jaw can become fatigued, and it becomes difficult to control them. This can lead to tension headaches.

When you shiver, the movements are small, and while shivering is the body’s way of keeping warm, working the muscles through a small range of movement means they will become tight if not properly stretched after use.

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 movements of the 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.

**Does Restless LegsSyndrome keepyou awake atnight? Blame your 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 stretched 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 facial 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 jaws – so make sure when resting that your mouth is not clenched shut.**