

## T2 health

# Thrills, spills and bellyaches

JOHN TAYLOR/INS

Music festivals are a blast, but they also present a risk to injury-prone rockers and ravers, writes

**Heather Beresford**

**T**hose crawling home from a music festival with nothing worse than a savage hang-over this summer should probably count themselves lucky.

Body surfing over the crowd, dancing all night, tripping over tent pegs and cooking on gas stoves are all popular festival activities — and send thousands of people limping to the medical tents nursing sprained ankles, slipped discs and burns.

The trench-foot outbreak at Glastonbury in 1998, caused by days of torrential rain and the wearing of wellies around the clock, was probably the most serious health scare to rock a music festival in Britain. But health problems are inevitable with thousands of people partying like mad in the open air. Body surfing and dancing all night cause thousands of injuries, and alcohol and drugs make matters worse by deadening the pain.

"Body surfing is particularly dangerous," says Jill Canney, a physiotherapist who will be working at several festivals throughout the summer. "People get carried away with the whole vibe and leap on to the pulsating crowd — only to find their arms and legs being yanked and twisted in several different directions. Drunken revellers aren't particularly safety-conscious, so body surfers are often dropped on their heads, compressing discs and facet joints in the neck."

It is too early to gauge the number of casualties at Glastonbury this year, but more than 4,000 people were treated at the last festival for ailments ranging from sprains, cuts and sunburn to slipped discs, dehydration, asthma and trauma. A woman went into labour, a man chipped a tooth in a punch-up and a policeman hurt his back falling off his horse.

Arranging medical care for hundreds of thousands of people is no mean feat. Festival Medical Services runs giant medical centres at several big events, including Glastonbury and Reading.

"It's like running a district



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hospital," says Carrie Hartley, the programme's co-ordinator. "We draft in hundreds of volunteers, including paramedics, doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, dentists, psychiatrists, podiatrists, midwives and pharmacists. Anyone with a serious injury is whisked off to a local hospital by helicopter, complete with our onsite radiographer, who can examine X-rays the minute they are taken."

Many injuries are sustained

before festivals even begin and medical staff at Glastonbury, for example, started work on Wednesday, treating people who had sprained their ankles while trekking across uneven fields.

Two days later and medical tents start filling up with people nursing dance injuries. "Eight hours of intense, high-impact exercise on a hard ground can strain muscles and ligaments in the knees and ankles," says

Canney. "Your body takes a real bashing dancing in a hot, crowded tent. You risk being stamped on, barged into, crushed or body-surfed over. It's not until the morning, when the alcohol wears off, that you start feeling the pain."

Another fun but hazardous activity is jumping up and down with a mate on your shoulders. Not only does the excess weight compress the spine, but a gyrating bottom on the back

of the neck forces the head forwards, pushing tremendous pressure through the discs.

Standing on tip-toes is another killer, and regular festival-goers dread the agonising calf pain that follows hours of trying to make themselves taller as they struggle to see bands over people's heads. Sleeping in a tent does not help matters, and thousands suffer back and neck problems. Crash out drunk and exhausted and you will probably sleep like a baby, even in a really awkward position.

"Sleeping without a pillow, under the influence of alcohol, can bring on acute torticollis — discs in the neck bulge, pinching the nerve and sending muscles into spasm," says Canney.

The weather at festivals largely dictates the nature of injuries, with wet, muddy conditions causing nasty hamstring and groin injuries as people slip and slide between the various stages. "As soon as we get the slightest bit of rain, the tents start filling up with people who have fallen over," says Canney. "Their feet shoot out from under them and they can end up doing the splits. It's not easy keeping a straight face when people describe how such injuries were sustained."

**It's not until the alcohol wears off that you start feeling the pain**

Hot, sunny festivals used to be just as problematic, with thousands of people seeking treatment for sunburn, sunstroke and dehydration. However, festival organisers say people are finally getting the message about the dangers of exposure to the sun, and that the level of problems has dropped dramatically.

"Festivals are an absolute blast and no one wants to be sensible," says Canney. "But I have seen people overexert themselves on the first day and then spend the entire festival sitting miserably by their tent, dosed up on painkillers and anti-inflammatory medication. Being careful and seeking help when you need it will help you to last the duration."

## How to party without paying a price

- Be careful with portable stoves and hot wax from candles. Burns are one of the most common injuries at festivals.
- Wear trainers with high shock absorption for dancing all night.
- Watch out for tent pegs — they're lurking everywhere, and thousands of people sprain ankles tripping over them.
- Wash your hands. There are germs everywhere at festivals so hygiene is crucial. Sickness and diarrhoea is the last thing you need when camping.
- Make a comfortable bed. Use a carry mat and pad any gaps with soft clothing, such as rolling a fleece to place under your neck.
- Walking around in tents with your head bent down strains the spine. Stroll around outside to straighten up. If you're sitting around for hours, keep shifting position and take the load off your back by moving

around regularly, leaning back on your arms and kneeling.

- Cover up in the sun and wear a hat. Apply high-factor sun cream regularly and drink plenty of water.
- Think about your sexual health and use a condom. Medical teams will usually dispense emergency contraception and the morning-after pill.
- Remember that alcohol is a muscle relaxant and painkiller. You won't feel the strain on your joints while dancing and walking for miles between the various marquees and tents, so take breaks. Rest a knee or ankle injury and seek treatment if it still hurts after a day.
- Consider the pollen count — medical teams have specialist nebulisers, but asthma sufferers should pack an inhaler.