

Eva Sotreriou, 39, has had chronic lower back pain since giving birth to her first child 18 years ago. She tells her story to **GRAHAM BURNS**

**B**ACK pain is common on my side of the family and I've had to endure it for ages with very little relief. None of the painkillers my doctor gave me over the years helped – even the very strong ones – and at times I would not be able to work for several weeks.

We run a very busy restaurant near our home in Bristol. I often worked through the constant stabbing pain because I had to but it was agony. I'd have to serve up 30 meals in half an hour while being charming to our customers.

I was also bringing up three children so even at home there was no time off. I've seen a chiropractor and a physiotherapist but neither helped me. In recent years I was able to take time off work to get over pain attacks but I was always conscious of being needed in the restaurant.

My back pain is not continuous but, in the past, when an attack came on I just had to wait for the pain to pass. The rest of the time I would run, swim and go to the gym. Last year, a physical therapist working at my gym suggested using a TSE device called Acticare. It uses pulses of electricity to relieve pain.

It worked very quickly and blocked out all my pain within a few minutes. I was bowled over by its effectiveness.

Now when I feel pain coming on I wear it for two or three hours until the discomfort recedes. After that I can be pain-free for days but often it's several weeks. I feel I've finally regained control of my life.

#### WHAT IS TSE?

Transcutaneous spinal electroanalgesia (TSE) delivers pain-blocking electrical signals up the spinal cord to the brain.

It can stop acute pain within a matter of minutes by blocking pain signals that the body sends to the brain. Previously, such sophisticated technology required electrodes to be surgically implanted near the patient's spine.

Over the past two years, pain relief experts have developed the technology into a portable device that can be bought and used without the support of doctors. It shares some similarities with the transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) machines that have been used to treat pain for many years.

Dr Alex MacDonald, 63, a former hospital pain relief expert who helped develop Acticare, says: "The pulses of electricity from a TENS machine are delivered in a different way to TSE. With a TENS machine, you need to turn up the voltage quite high for a longer period of time to relieve very severe pain or get to the spinal cord. By upping the current you can cause the patient pain – which is the opposite of what you want.

"TSE works in a different way and is able to deliver a higher voltage – for a shorter period of time – which penetrates deeper into tissue and is able to get to the spinal cord. Typically a TENS



**RELIEF:**  
Eva says she has regained control of her life

Picture: BARRY GOMER

# Now I can switch off my agony

machine might give a sufferer two or three hours' relief before they have to use it again. TES machine signals are able to block the pain for two or three days."

Another advantage is that by placing the two TSE pads on the spine, pain at several different sites in the body can be treated simultaneously, compared to the other machine which can only treat one location at a time.

Dr MacDonald, who worked at the Frenchay hospital in Bristol, has tested the machine on hundreds of patients. He says: "We first devised a bedside electrical spinal stimulator that was shown in clinical trials to be very effective. However, our patients needed a portable unit, which we developed in 1997 but the technology then couldn't deliver the therapy at the required power level. Even so, around 12,000 patients benefited and 150 UK pain clinics used it.

"The new Acticare device has taken two years and cost us more than £500,000 to develop. It is the first machine to combine portability and ease of

use with the necessary power to be really effective. This is a major advance in the technology of pain management."

**M**ARIA MARTIN of the back-pain charity Backcare, which has approved the device for members, says: "Acticare was given the thumbs up by our testers. One of our volunteers has used it for some time and swears by it."

New non-drug treatments for chronic pain are much needed. Over-the-counter painkillers such as aspirin and paracetamol can cause fatal stomach bleeding and COX-2 inhibitor drugs, which were originally thought to be safer, have been found to increase people's risk of strokes and heart attacks.

● TSE devices cost £199 and can be bought direct from the maker. Call 0800 028 1400 or visit [www.acticare.com](http://www.acticare.com) – where you can receive a £30 discount.