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Managing migraine in the workplace

Provides information for employers and employees on how to manage migraine

Migraine is the world's most common neurological condition, ranked by the WHO as the 6th most disabling disease worldwide. It affects about half a million people in Ireland, costing the economy €252 million per year due to loss of productivity and sick-days. On any given day in Ireland over 13,000 people are suffering from migraine – the majority forming part of the workforce.

Migraine is inherited in up to 60% of sufferers and affects three times more women than men. Symptoms of an attack can include an intense throbbing headache, confusion, nausea, vomiting, and extreme sensitivity to light, noise, and smells and, in severe cases loss of consciousness or paralysis on one side. An attack can be utterly debilitating and can last between 4 hours and 3 days.

About 20% of people experience migraine 'aura' which refers to a range of neurological disturbances eg visual such as flickering lights or blind spots; muscular weakness; numbness; slurring of speech; loss of co-ordination or confusion. Whilst some people experience only one or two attacks a year, others suffer on a weekly or even daily basis to the extent that their quality of life is substantially reduced.

Triggers

Trigger factors, whilst they do not 'cause' migraine, can precipitate an attack. While some people may be very sensitive to specific triggers, others may be vulnerable only when several triggers combine at once.

Common triggers are:

- stress
- food and alcohol
- hormonal changes

- too much/little sleep
- change of routine
- too much/little exercise
- meteorological or environmental triggers
- flicker from TV/computer screens
- poor posture.

Triggers in the workplace

Although there is no cure, migraine can be managed by tracking personal patterns in a migraine diary, learning the advance warning signs and discovering how to proactively defend against an attack.

Despite the massive impact that migraine can have on job satisfaction only 50% of sufferers are receiving treatment. For many people, stress can be a trigger factor and there are many potential triggers to be found in the workplace, including:

- long periods spent in front of a computer screen
- delayed meals or irregular eating patterns
- poor posture at an office desk
- lack of exercise
- loud noise or bright lights
- dehydration
- strong smells
- air conditioning/lack of fresh air.

With the right information, support and treatment – the majority of migraineurs can bring their condition under control, reducing the frequency and severity of attacks.

Medications, dietary changes, relaxation and biofeedback can reduce, or even eliminate up to 90% of attacks. Migraine-specific medication can be effective in up to 80% of cases.

Everybody benefits if migraine is properly managed.

Benefits to employees

- increased job satisfaction
- better health and well-being
- better social and family life

Benefits to employers

- increased productivity

- less absenteeism
- positive workplace environment

Creating a healthy working environment

Ideally employers and employees will work together in tackling the problem of migraine in the workplace. Employers are increasingly aware of the problems and benefits of properly managing migraine in the workplace. It is well recognised that work impacts on social cohesion and quality of life. Creating a healthy working environment can be a facilitator rather than a barrier to a person living with migraine, and will have wider benefits across the workforce.

Minor adjustments to the work environment can have a dramatic impact, especially for migraineurs in terms of preventing and aborting an attack. The earlier an employee can take steps to abort an attack, the sooner they will be back to work. Employers should, as much as possible:

- install and maintain a good lighting system which imitates natural daylight closely
- ensure that the noise levels from machinery are kept to a minimum
- design ergonomic workstations
- be conscious of employee stress levels
- supply readily accessible drinking water
- encourage employees to develop a contingency plan for when a migraine strikes at work
- show general consideration in this area to send a positive signal to all staff
- organise an outreach day for employees
- encourage a healthy work/life balance culture
- maintain efficient extractors if strong fumes or smells are produced
- consider allowing flexible working hours
- provide a rest room
- provide stress management training.

While larger companies can afford to make many adjustments, smaller businesses can still implement small changes that can make the difference to their staff being fully able to partake in their workplace.

This guide was written by the Migraine Association of Ireland which provides information and training to employers as well as educational programmes on migraine management for employees. Visit www.migraine.ie, contact the MAI helpline on 1850 200 378, or e-mail info@migraine.ie.