Silent Pain

Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy

A GUIDEBOOK

Migraine In The Workplace for Employers, Human Resource, And Occupational Safety and Health Professionals
Aim of this guide

This guide on the management of migraine in the workplace is aimed at employers and human resource professionals from both SME’s and large businesses. Migraine is a common condition in people of working age.

By supporting employees with migraine to perform at work, organizations retain valuable experience and knowledge and boost productivity. Helping the employee to manage migraine better may also reduce healthcare costs and sickness absence.

Acknowledgements

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This publication is not a substitute for detailed advice of an individual’s particular rights and circumstances from medical, occupational safety and health, and human resource professionals.

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Making workplaces migraine-friendly

- Limit noise levels and provide adjustable lighting
- Install anti-glare filters on computer & TV screens
- Promote a fragrance-free environment and consider alternative cleaning detergents (limit scents & odors)
- Set aside a quiet space for employees to use should they experience a migraine attack
- Consider a flexible schedule for employees experiencing migraine such as work from home
- Time off for medical appointments
- Setting realistic and reasonable expectations and key performance indicators (KPIs)

Lack of awareness and knowledge among employers often leads to unintended stigma in the workplace.

Because of this stigma, those living with migraine often do their best to hide their situation in the workplace, which leads to under-reporting and going untreated.

With the right information and support, most people with migraine are able to manage their condition and work effectively.

Approximately 3.9 million individuals or 12% of the population estimated to live with migraine in Malaysia.

Individuals lost 17 workdays every year due to migraine-related absenteeism.

What is migraine?
Migraine is a very common and relatively invisible cause of potential disability and suffering.

It is the 3rd most common disabling condition in the world.

It disproportionately and dramatically impacts women of working age, affecting roughly one in five women in their lives.

Migraine is complex and treatments differ from person to person.

There is no cure, but reducing severity, frequency, improving responsiveness of painkillers are possible.

Symptoms may include sensitivity to light, sound and smells, feeling nauseous and vomiting.

Common workplace triggers
- Stress
- Lack of exercise
- Loud or repetitive noise
- Dehydration
- Bright lights
- Caffeine and alcohol
- Not enough sleep
- Strong odors
- Screen glare

Guiding Principles

Communication and disclosure
The approach taken should not be stigmatising. Due to possible impact on job security or career progression, some employees may not wish to disclose their condition or ask for support.
Safe and open communication channels must be in place for disclosure to happen.

Confidentiality
The right of staff to privacy and confidentiality applies to migraine and any other health conditions. Personal information should not be disclosed to a third party without their consent.
Perceived lack of confidentiality is a challenge to implementing workplace health policies.

Building supportive work cultures
All staff including management and employees play a role in creating a healthy workplace, and should feel supported to speak openly about their health and wellbeing needs. Meaningful participation and engagement of leadership is essential for workplace health approaches to succeed.

Awareness and education on migraine help employees to cope in a supportive environment of colleagues and managers.

Equal Opportunity
To be inclusive at work, employees need to be empowered of how they want to work and where they want to work.

Micromanagement should be reduced at all levels. Equally important, they need to be provided with equal opportunity to the accessibility for resources and information to perform at work. This can support employees to reduce the work stress leading to migraine.

Organisations that implement policies on reasonable accommodations and inclusive HR practices will optimize productivity and retain talent.
Migraine in the Workplace

1.1 The right to safe and healthy workplaces

Migraine is a leading cause of disability worldwide for individuals below the age of 50 years old, which means it is likely to affect the economically active in employment.

Employers have the obligation to ensure the safety, care, and welfare of all their employees in the workplace, as stipulated in the Occupation Safety and Health Act 1994, including the provision and maintenance of a working environment that is safe and free from health risks.

In the modern workplace, healthy workplaces lead to greater productivity, competitiveness and sustainability.

Employers have a duty of care to ensure workers are treated equally and fairly.

The impact of migraine on the workplace presents a serious issue for employers as well as the individual employee.

The annual cost of unhealthy workplaces: RM 1.46 million per employer.

Sickness absence policies should be developed so that people with long term health conditions, such as migraine are not put at a disadvantage.

Failure to support employees can be costly, leading to problems with retention, poor morale and reduced productivity.

3.9 million individuals or 12% of the Malaysian population estimated to have migraine.

More common in those aged 30 to 45.
1.2 Business case for addressing migraine

Lost productivity accounts for the vast majority of migraine cost.

In Singapore, absence from work and presenteeism due to migraine accounted for over 80% of economic costs incurred among full time employees, amounting to over SGD 800 million. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, indirect costs contributed to around 90% of the total economic burden.

Employees with migraine often suffer alone due to the common perception that it is similar to tension-type headaches.

Taking medical leave may be seen unfavorably by colleagues or managers. Hence the employee may choose to continue working despite being affected by symptoms, leading to presenteeism.

Presenteeism or working while sick, is common among people living with migraines. They fear social judgement about their illness.

A person may even attend work while having a migraine attack due to fear of facing a disciplinary hearing or some form of financial penalty.

She or he could be concerned about being seen as unreliable or faking it.

Workplaces are key places where migraine-friendly policies should be enacted to reduce the impact on performance and productivity. Strategies implemented are thus a long-term investment rather than a cost to the organisation.

Promoting good health and well-being among employees increases the value of an organisation. It has a positive impact on increasing and sustaining productivity.

Failing to invest in structures which help retain staff with long-term health conditions leads to significant costs not only in morale and productivity, but also losses in training and institutional capacity.
Migraine is a neurological disorder broadly classified into migraines with auras and those without, as well as whether they are episodic or recurrent attacks (Table 1).

Migraine can strike at any time of the working day and can be potentially debilitating. More than 90% of people with migraine are unable to work or function normally during their migraine.

Migraine and severe headaches are the second leading cause of presenteeism in the workplace.

Having a migraine without aura, is 5 times more common than migraine with aura.\(^1\)

**Fact 1:** Migraine is disabling

The MIDAS (Migraine Disability Assessment) questionnaire is used to measure the impact of migraines, and allows for determination of pain intensity and disability level.\(^1\)

**MIDAS Grades I - IV** indicates little or no disability to severe disability.

Patients with Grade I or Grade II migraine typically require only over-the-counter analgesics to reduce migraine disability.

Grade III or IV require migraine-specific treatments.

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Grade III or IV require migraine-specific treatments.

Migraines without aura, and with aura, can be episodic or chronic

**Episodic**

Occurs 0 to 14 days/month

**Chronic**

Headache attacks ≥ 15 days/month for more than 3 months of which ≥ 8 days are migraine headaches.


Fact 2: Not just a headache

In general, there are four phases of a migraine and headache pain consists of only one of these phases.

Each individual experiences migraine differently. Some may get a few attacks a year, while others as frequently as a few times a week.

People may have different or a combination of symptoms in different attacks.

Migraine headaches typically last between 4 to 72 hours.

Symbols such as light and sound sensitivity, and feeling nauseous may cease in between attacks, allowing for employees to be able to return to work.

The complex nature of migraine means that the treatments available are varied and differ from person to person.

Though there is currently no cure for migraine, there is effective treatment.3

Migraine phases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Premonitory</th>
<th>Aura</th>
<th>Headache</th>
<th>Postdrome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hours to days before</td>
<td>Mood changes</td>
<td>5 – 60 minutes</td>
<td>4 – 72 hours</td>
<td>24 – 48 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fatigue</td>
<td>Most commonly visual disturbance (flashing, shimmering, zigzagging lines, blind spot)</td>
<td>Throbbing pain</td>
<td>Feeling ‘hungover’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stiffness</td>
<td>Numbness and tingling</td>
<td>Sensitive to light or sound</td>
<td>Lack of comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Light and sound sensitivity</td>
<td>Verbal and motor disturbances</td>
<td>Nausea and vomiting</td>
<td>Fatigue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difficulty concentrating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Depressed or euphoric mood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cravings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thirst</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1/3 of all patients

Yes, migraine is a medical condition

- Neurobiological pain and headache disorder.
- Caused by hypersensitive trigeminovascular system
- Leading cause of disability and financial burden5, 14
- The appropriate reference for treatment: a neurologist

Measuring migraine severity 14

There is no objective measure of migraine severity in individual patients and this may add to stigmatisation of this condition.

Preventing & Managing Migraine in the Workplace

A range of treatment options exists for migraine which should be decided with a doctor or other healthcare professional.

As it is commonly under-diagnosed and under-treated, some people with migraine may not be on optimal medical management.

Acute treatment is most common, including migraine-specific medications that must be taken within one hour of the onset of headache.

To avoid medication overuse, there is a limit on the number of times acute treatment should be taken in a month. Resting in a quiet, dark room will often be necessary and sleep can be therapeutic.

Preventive treatment may be prescribed to be on a regular basis to reduce frequency of attacks.

Lifestyle and behaviour modification is also important, including avoidance of triggers, regular sleep schedule, healthy eating, limiting alcohol and caffeine intake, relaxation and stress management.

In general, the minimal provisions for first aid care in workplaces are below:

- The availability of a cool, dark room for the employee to rest/lie down
- Cool compress or ice pack
- Over-the-counter analgesics such as paracetamol or ibuprofen
- Emergency hotline numbers and contacts
Recovery from migraine is an individualized process and is person-centered, not illness-centered. Having a good understanding of migraine helps in recovery. Recovery can occur, even if migraine symptoms are present. Recovery is not a linear process and has occasional setbacks and learning from experience. People differ in the way they recover from migraine. Stigma can slow the recovery process.

An employee-centred approach (5Rs)  

- Educate employees about health policies and available support
- Regularly collect and review information about health risks in the workplace (e.g. too much workload and poor working conditions such as poor ventilation and lighting)
- Establish clear responsibility and accountability roles for the development and maintenance of a healthy workplace
- Recovery from migraine is an individualized process and is person-centered, not illness-centered.
- Having a good understanding of migraine helps in recovery.
- Recovery can occur, even if migraine symptoms are present.
- Recovery is not a linear process and has occasional setbacks and learning from experience.
- People differ in the way they recover from migraine.
- Stigma can slow the recovery process.

Build supportive workplace environments which seek perspectives and advice from employees
Accept change
Trust your employees' judgement
Keep a long-term perspective
Use problem solving and reasoning to work through the issue rather than ignoring them, detached from them, or wishing that they would go away.
Take care of your greatest assets, your staff

Communicate about migraine across the organization to reduce fear, stigma, and discrimination
Cultivate a healthy workplace culture that is conducive to supporting employees' health
Promote accessibility in the workplace by accommodating changes
Train managers how to identify migraine, and on available employee tools and supports
Lead by example

Ask employees what they need. They will know what they are capable of and what they need to succeed in the workplace.
Set realistic goals and expectations based on the needs of the workplace and your employee's abilities.
Lead by example. Show that as an employer, you value, trust, and respect the employee who is returning to the workplace.

15 Modified from 5Rs of Workplace Mental Health, Mental Health Commission, Government of Canada.

PREVENTING & MANAGING MIGRAINE IN THE WORKPLACE
## Building Migraine-Friendly Workplaces

### Step 1: Assess

| Identify workplace policies, practices and resources | Manager/business owner | Human Resources department
| Identify health and well-being needs of employees | Informal discussion | Health and Safety committee
| Build a business case or project proposal | Link to financial implications, improved customer or client experience, productivity, efficiency | Online survey Group discussion Team meetings

- Link to organisational goals, values, key performance indicators, staff survey results, absenteeism and turnover rates, legal and ethical aspects

### Step 2: Engage

| Get support from stakeholders | Manager/ supervisor | Middle and senior management
| Involvement of staff | Yes | Yes
| Approval for proposed policy with resource allocation | Existing basic resources | Wider range of resources or integrated with current initiatives
| Find champions, executive sponsor and establish team | ---- | Yes

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16 Based on the Generalist Intervention Model (GIM) of planned organisational change. [https://mswcareers.com/generalistinterventionmodel/](https://mswcareers.com/generalistinterventionmodel/). Retrieved June 2020
### Step 3: Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assess workplace objectives and staff needs</th>
<th>Basic template</th>
<th>May conduct a psychosocial work hazard audit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Priorities</td>
<td>Support Protection</td>
<td>Support Protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design action plan</td>
<td>Establish goals, targeted strategies, timeline and implementation period</td>
<td>Integrate as part of workplace health and well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design monitoring plan</td>
<td>Establish feedback mechanism</td>
<td>Plan internal communications and branding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure staff confidentiality can be protected if accessing support</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Evaluation and monitoring mechanism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Step 4: Implement

| Consider training needs to support policy | Yes | Yes |
| Ensure staff are well-informed of the process of seeking support | Yes | Yes |
| Ensure ownership/ assign responsibility | Manager/ programme coordinator | Involvement of champions, senior leaders, project team |
| Incorporate into induction/orientation programme | --- | Yes |

### Step 5: Monitor and review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Record feedback, outcomes or indicators</th>
<th>Seek feedback from staff</th>
<th>Employee survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Record activities conducted, participant ratings and budget</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Team meeting and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality improvement</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Good practice for employers

As an employer, what can you do when an employee is missing work due to migraines? Employees with migraines should have the same protection that an employee with another major illness or disability would have.

It is important for employers to do what they can to reasonably accommodate, and to reduce migraine triggers in the workplace and keep employees happy, working and healthy.

Employers are taking on more than just the costs of medical treatments for employees suffering from migraine symptoms, the time lost at work and productivity, in particular, substantially impacts employers.

However, new treatment options for chronic migraine make it possible for employers to consider providing health plans which allow for workers to stay on the job and keep performing at a competent level.

These are likely to deliver cost savings for the organisation, as well as improve health and well-being of employees.

Although migraines can be extremely debilitating, many people are extremely effective in managing their condition and also may experience no ill effects between episodes.

Experiencing migraines should not be a barrier to promotion and professional development at work and measures or "reasonable accommodations", should be taken to ensure that people who experience migraines are not treated less favourably for a reason related to their condition in the recruitment or promotion process.

It is essential to refer employees to neurologists and other suitable healthcare professionals for treatment.

A reasonable accommodation is assistance or changes to the work environment or to work practices that will enable an employee to do her or his job despite having a disability.

Do employers have to put accommodations in place?

It is good human resource (HR) practice for employers to provide reasonable accommodation to people with underlying health conditions to promote healthy workplaces, good productivity and resilience to the workforce.

What is considered "reasonable"?

What is deemed ‘reasonable’ is shaped and determined by the role and scope of work, size of the organisation, the financial and logistical factors incurred by the accommodation, as well as other issues.

The COVID-19 crisis has forced employers and employees to adopt practices which ensure that they won’t suffer missed work time, reduced performance at work and related costs. Some of these practices have the added benefit of also helping people living with migraine.

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Reasonable HR practices for employee wellbeing

If the job doesn’t require an employee to be physically present at the office at certain times, consider flexible hours and deliverable-based performance. It allows employees to work when they are able to without worrying about clocking in.

Work-from-home option allows for employees to control their environment when they feel a migraine coming on. This could help them reduce the severity of migraines or prevent them altogether.

Making clean drinking water available to ensure employees remain hydrated.

Migraine sufferers may find relief in a dark and quiet room. If you have the space for it, create a migraine-friendly break room.

Provide time off for employees to go for medical appointments. Employers could consider accommodating this flexibility.

Ensure that desks, chairs and computers at workstations are positioned at the right height and clearance to prevent employees into uncomfortable and awkward seating postures.

Manage lighting and glare. Overhead lighting may cause direct and indirect glare which reduce increase the risks of migraine. Direct or indirect glare can be managed by introducing shades, blinds or filters.

Increasing ventilation and improving airflow in the workplace helps prevent dry and airless environment. This prevents headaches and fatigue.

Introduce stress management training for supervisors and employees to identify and manage stress factors within the workplace. It will help provide information and support for those suffering from migraine.

Consult occupational safety and health professionals on how to develop and maintain migraine-friendly workplaces.

Implementing these steps has the potential to improve productivity, lower turnover and lead to happier employees.

For Employees

Why should employees inform employers of their condition?

Not being informed that an employee experiences migraines deprives employers of the ability to be more understanding and provide possible support.

Understandably, informing employers is not an easy thing to do and may be intimidating. However, doing so allows for management an opportunity to better understand how it affects the employee and introduce supportive changes.

For Employers

When should employers be involved?

An employee may choose whether or not to tell their employer that they have migraine issues.

If a migraine episode or attack has occurred at work, an employer may feel it necessary to discuss with an employee about their condition.

An employee can also request for a discussion with human resource or occupational health staff to work out an appropriate way forward.

1. How do migraines affect your work?
   e.g. hard to concentrate/ focus, nauseous, blurred vision

2. What, if any, triggers your migraines?
   e.g. loud noises, bright lights, certain smells

# Migraine Action Plan

3. What can be done at work to help you minimise migraine attacks?
   - e.g. shades, changes in lighting, periodic breaks

4. What would you like your work colleagues to know about your condition?
   - e.g. more information on migraine, confidentiality

5. Are there any warning signs that you think your colleagues should be on a look out in case of an attack?
   - e.g. fatigue, disorientation

6. What should they do if they see these signs?
   - e.g. talk to me about it

7. What support do you need to manage migraine symptoms?
   - e.g. work from home, flexible working hours, access to a quiet room

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Staff

Manager/ Supervisor

Date
References


American Migraine Foundation (2017). Migraine At Work


Migraine Canada. https://migrainecanada.org/


The Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy is an independent public policy research and health communications organisation based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, dedicated to discussing health and social issues through the lens of public policy.

The Galen Centre works to improve health and social conditions through research, advocacy, networking and relationship-building.

It promotes and advocates public debate and education on ideas and proposals which support individual freedom, choice and innovation.