

Headache UK

An alliance working for people with headache



The economic cost of migraine and headache

**Based on a presentation by Dr Tim Steiner, Imperial College, London
to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Primary Headache Disorders
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Migraine – the statistics

Every day in the UK 190,000 people suffer a migraine attack. It's a condition which affects 5.85 million adults in the country - 14.3% of the population or one in seven. It leads to 100,000 people missing work or school every day which represents a huge loss of time and productivity.

Migraine is very common and extremely disabling. These two aspects combined give rise to the heavy public burden of migraine and have a serious economic impact through reduced productivity.

Research has shown more than half of all migraine sufferers have an attack 12 times a year, but some migraine sufferers experience attacks far more frequently, giving rise to an average frequency across the UK of 24 attacks a year. A migraine usually lasts 24 hours. The vast majority of sufferers (80%) report severe pain or extremely severe pain.

When migraine is triggered, most people are disabled, with 73% having limited ability to work. More than three-quarters (76%) say they always have to lie down during an attack and 50% need to take time off work.

In addition to the disabling headache, sufferers also experience other symptoms. Three quarters report nausea, plus phonophobia and photophobia (in which ordinary levels of noise and light cause discomfort).

Migraine prevalence is age-related and is most prevalent between the ages of 30–50, when people are generally at their most productive, furthering their careers and raising children.

Women are more likely to suffer from migraine than men, with 18.3% of the population affected, compared to 7.6% of men.

The burden of migraine is not restricted to the attack. There is constant fear of the next occurrence, leading to avoidance behaviour and lifestyle compromise. Whilst migraine attacks are episodic, their consequences are present all the time. More than three-quarters of sufferers (78%) report that their activities are limited by their condition. A small but important minority – one in every seven – feel chances of promotion at work are adversely affected, a consequence with cumulative effects over an entire lifetime.

More than half (54%) said migraine interferes with family and social relationships and 27% said migraine affects their social life.

The burden of migraine not only affects the person with migraine. It results in other colleagues or family members having to take on an increased share of chores or responsibilities. A UK survey of hospital employees noted that almost half of people during a migraine attack needed to rely on others for some form of help. It therefore impacts on employers and work colleagues.

The economic cost of migraine and headache

The healthcare costs of migraine in the UK are estimated at £150 million per year, including the cost of prescription drugs, as well as visits to general practitioners.

But absenteeism through migraine carries a considerably higher bill, estimated at a staggering £2.25 billion a year in the UK. This is calculated on the basis of migraine causing 25 million lost days, equivalent to five million lost weeks a year, on a gross weekly wage of £450 (weighted to account for the higher number of women suffering from migraine and lower wages).

However, this figure is conservative as it only covers absenteeism, and does not include the lower levels of productivity of migraine sufferers who do go into work during an attack. Nor does it include health care costs.

The costs attributable to migraine are less than half the cost of all headache disorders collectively putting the estimated burden of all headache disorders at a conservative £5 billion a year.

If however we take into consideration more than just productivity losses and add the cost of disability (based on the World Health Organisation's measurements of disability), then migraine "costs" £3.42 billion per year, and all headache, at a little over double this, "costs" £7 billion annually. These figures are likely to be nearer the truth and a more rounded estimate.

This is totally out of proportion to the healthcare allocation to headache disorders, which is just £250 million, around 3.5% of what headache actually costs the country.

Given that headache and migraine are generally treatable, the potential for very large gains to be made to the national economy through a relatively small investment in health care seems compellingly clear.

Recommendations

Headache disorders clearly present the UK with a major economic burden, estimated to be in the region of £7 billion a year. It must therefore be acknowledged as a major public health issue and have higher recognition by the Government.

There would be a clear cost-benefit to addressing and reducing the incidence of migraine and headache in the UK, in addition to the humanitarian impact.

Industry and employers should be more aware of the considerable costs in terms of lost productivity. More should be done to assist employees who suffer from headache and to address possible triggers in the workplace.

The World Health Organisation ranks migraine in the top 20 causes of disability. We would like to see the Department of Health acknowledge that migraine and headaches are a major public health issue and respond accordingly, raising the healthcare allocation from the current £250 million.

More money should be allocated to research into the causes and treatment of migraine and headache.