

Migraines, screens and stress



How to make migraines less of a management, as well as an absence, headache

The workplace think-tank The Work Foundation [has estimated](#) that migraine costs the UK economy some £8.8bn a year in lost productivity and damaged health and wellbeing, with approximately 86 million days taken off work because of the condition.

Let's get one thing clear first: yes, the main symptom of a migraine is an intense headache, often on one side of the head. However, a migraine is much, much more than just a headache.

[As the NHS points out](#), a migraine can often be accompanied by a severe throbbing sensation, nausea, actual vomiting, sensitivity to light and sound, loss of concentration, hot and cold sweats, and stomach and abdominal pains.

Moreover, migraines can last for anything from a few hours to a matter of days, and leave sufferers feeling totally wiped out afterwards. On top of this, it is becoming clear migraines, [or what Public Health England terms 'continuing headaches'](#), can be one symptom of 'long Covid', or the long-term side-effects that can accompany a bout of coronavirus.

During September The Migraine Trust held its annual [Migraine Awareness Week](#) designed to publicise the condition – and so this time of year is an opportune moment to be focusing on this potentially debilitating illness for a number of reasons.

Stress, anxiety, tension... and screens

First, this unprecedented year of pandemic, lockdown, economic meltdown and anxiety has led to more and more people suffering from both stress-induced headaches and more severe migraines. [The trust's research](#) has suggested more than half (58%) of those who have migraine feel their condition has worsened since the beginning of March. Of those, nearly half again (46%) attribute this to increased stress and anxiety.

Second, there's how, where and when we're all now working. At one level, increased home working has offered people the potential at least to be more flexible in their working arrangements. For example, not having to engage with noisy, stressful public transport or big, glary offices can be a positive in enabling people to manage migraine episodes.

The flipside, however, is more home working has led to an explosion in screen time, both emails and more of us spending our days jumping from video call to video call, with the potential for ['Zoom fatigue'](#) to set in.

Screens can be a common [trigger](#) for migraine in many people, as well as just causing general headaches and eye strain. The fact that for many home workers their workstation – especially the lighting – may not be ideal or easily changed can also exacerbate the problem.

On top of this, general anxiety and job insecurity has increased ['e-presenteeism'](#), where people feel they constantly have to be visible – at their screen, on their email, on that next video call. Pressures like these can make managing a condition such as migraine even harder.

At one level, yes, a migraine is a headache. Yet write off this often-debilitating condition that causes 86 million lost working days a year as just a headache at your peril. With many workers feeling anxious as we move into winter, hunched in front of their home computer all day or jumping from video call to video call (or all three), supporting migraine, along with general tension and eye-strain headaches, is something employers may increasingly need to be prioritising.

About the author

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Guidance on migraine and home working

To this end, The Migraine Trust has published potentially useful advice on how to manage [migraine alongside home working](#). It recommends the importance of maintaining a routine when working from home. This should, ideally, include a proper start and finish to the working day, regular screen breaks and, if possible, getting outside for a period, perhaps at lunchtime.

When it comes to screens, the trust recommends that, where possible, employees should:

- Use an anti-glare screen or get an anti-glare screen cover. If you wear glasses speak to your optician about what changes may help (such as, perhaps, anti-glare lenses).
- Adjust your screen brightness. Generally, it should be similar to the light around the screen.
- Adjust your screen refresh rate (or how many times per second it refreshes its image), with a higher rate usually better. If need be, ask your IT team to help with this.
- Try not to sit too close to the screen. Ideally, at least two feet away is recommended.

Managing video conferencing and migraines

When it comes to online and video conferencing, the trust again has practical tips, including:

- Where you can, turn the video function off and use audio only.
- Ask colleagues to consider other methods for meetings, such as telephone calls.
- Try different views to see which one works best for you.
- Ask participants to mute themselves when not speaking.
- Ask colleagues to try and avoid sitting with a bright light behind them.
- Investigate if the platform you are using has a dark mode (which inverts colours to light text on a dark background) as some people with migraine can find this helps.
- Talk to colleagues about breaking up the number of video calls/contacts in a day and making sure people are given enough time away from the screen between meetings.

The key here, as WPA's Chief People Officer, Neil Davidson, emphasises, is communication, communication, communication (and ideally not all via Zoom or Teams). "It is important managers are using – and communicating – tips like these to help employees manage their condition but also to show migraine and screen use is something on your radar," he says.

Many of us have found during the past few months that our screen use has shot up, whether working from home or even when we've begun to come back into the office. It is self-evident this can, if we're not careful, lead to eye strain, headaches and even migraines.

Add to this people feeling stressed or anxious about work, job security or finances – or just general fears about how the pandemic is likely to affect them and their families over the autumn – and it is not hard to see how tension headaches can become more commonplace and, in the worst-case scenario, spiral into debilitating migraines," Neil adds.

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