

Facts and figures

Key facts and figures about migraine

Prevalence

Migraine is the third most common disease in the world (behind dental caries and tension-type headache) with an estimated global prevalence of 14.7% (that's around 1 in 7 people).¹

Migraine is more prevalent than diabetes, epilepsy and asthma combined.²

Chronic migraine affects approximately 2% of the world population.³

Migraine affects three-times as many women as men, with this higher rate being most likely hormonally-driven.⁴

Research suggests that 3,000 migraine attacks occur every day for each million of the general population. This equates to over 190,000 migraine attacks every day in the UK.⁵

More than three quarters of migraineurs experience at least one attack each month, and more than half experience severe impairment during attacks.²

Migraine often starts at puberty and most affects those aged between 35 and 45 years, but it can trouble much younger people including children.⁶

About 4% of boys and girls in pre pubertal age suffer from migraine. As children get older there is a predominance among girls.⁷

Burden – impact and disability

Migraine is ranked globally as the seventh most disabling disease among all diseases (responsible for 2.9% of all years of life lost to disability/YLDs) and the leading cause of disability among all neurological disorders.¹

The estimated proportion of time spent with migraine (i.e. experiencing an attack) during an average person's life is 5.3%.¹

It is estimated that the UK population loses 25 million days from work or school each year because of migraine.⁵

Severe migraine attacks are classified by the World Health Organization as among the most disabling illnesses, comparable to dementia, quadriplegia and active psychosis.⁸

Migraine/chronic headache was found to be the second most frequently identified cause of short-term absence (47%) for non-manual employees.⁹

Absenteeism from migraine alone costs £2.25 billion per year in the UK, calculated on the basis of 25 million lost days.⁵

Migraine is estimated to cost the NHS in the UK £150 million per year, mostly from the costs of prescription drugs and GP visits. The NHS expenditure on all headache disorders is estimated at £250 million per year.²

The financial burden of migraine on the UK economy is conservatively estimated at £3.42 billion per year. Including all headache disorders the cost rises to £5-7 billion annually. These figures take into consideration the costs of healthcare, lost productivity through both absenteeism and presenteeism, and disability.²

Migraine is the least publicly funded of all neurological illnesses relative to its economic impact.⁸

Depression is three times more common in people with migraine or severe headaches than in healthy individuals.¹⁰

Cause

Migraine is a disorder that almost certainly has a genetic basis.⁴

An older theory on the causation of migraine included that migraine is primarily a disease of the blood vessels. It is now accepted that migraine is not related to any vascular pathology and brain mechanisms are more likely involved in the development of migraine attacks.¹¹

Diagnosis and management

Migraine remains undiagnosed and undertreated in at least 50% of patients, and less than 50% of migraine patients consult a physician.¹²

In the UK, 3% of GP consultations and 30% of neurology consultations are for headache, with migraine the most common diagnosis.¹³

The greatest single advance in migraine management in the last half of the 20th century was the triptan class of drugs, which emerged in the 1990s and the first (sumatriptan) was developed at Glaxo in Stevenage, UK.²

One of the most frequently cited health problems treated with alternative therapies is headaches.¹⁴

Worldwide, just four hours are committed to headache disorders in formal undergraduate medical training, and 10 hours in specialist training.⁴

Headache teaching is not on the curriculum for approximately 75% of the undergraduate medical schools in England.¹⁵

Despite the evidenced clinical and cost efficacy of specialist nurses, there are only around 12 trained headache specialist nurses for the whole of England.¹⁵

Less than 50% of migraine patients are satisfied with their current treatment. The majority self-medicate using non-prescription (over-the-counter) medication and do not seek medical help.²

Historical

In prehistoric times migraine was treated with trepanning, a surgical procedure that involves drilling a hole into the skull with one aim being to release evil spirits.¹⁶

The word migraine derives from the Greek word 'hemicrania' (imikrania; ημικρανία) which means 'half the skull'. In 400 BC Hippocrates described in detail the occurrence of migraine attacks, including the visual disturbances during migraine aura and the relief from vomiting. The word ημικρανία was later established by the Greek physician Κλαύδιος Γαληνός (Galen of Pergamon).¹⁷

Migraine and other headache disorders were first comprehensively classified in 1988 by the International Headache Society (IHS). The International Classification of Headache Disorders, 3rd edition (IHCD-3) beta was published in 2013. It is recognised by the World Health Organization and researchers and clinicians worldwide refer to its diagnostic criteria.