

## EMPLOYER CAUSING STRESS?

FACE IT, STRESS AT WORK IS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR TO HEADACHES.

The frequency for migraine headaches in the adult population is 18 percent of women and 6 percent of men. The figures are the results from several large epidemiologic studies throughout America and other countries. Some people have chronic daily headaches, which means a headache for more than 15 days of the month and that's 4.5 percent of the general population.

Many would assume stress and headaches would remain prominent for those working long hours and/or maintaining executive positions, but that's not always the case.

According to Dr. Pamela Blake, a neurologist who specializes in headache medicine at the Headache Center of Northwest, long hours or being very busy is rarely a source of stress for people. The majority of her patients with higher headache rates work at law offices, and are teachers, and blue-collar workers.

"I think that the most important factor isn't so much the job or the number of hours. It's usually their supervisors," said Dr. Blake. "Their direct supervisors seem to be the most common biggest factor as making stress contributing to headaches."

Studies reveal the greatest frustration level for employees is not having a supervisor's appreciation and support for their job duties and/or helping them to grow and maintain a well performance, which makes them always feel unutilized or being undercut. Dr. Blake believes most people can handle busyness and long hours when knowing that's what their job requires. However, having a dually heavy workload, for instance, a workload not feasible for one person to accomplish, is definitely a source of stress. Those feeling as if they are up against a brick wall when attempting to accomplish a change because their supervisor won't let them do or try different things to reduce stress, are also very frustrated.

"I've suggested to people that they change their jobs, because if it's a coworker, you can move to a different location, but if it's the supervisor it's hard to get around that. Sometimes the only way to deal with it is to change jobs."

When asked about those in the higher executive positions, the neurologist said she doesn't have headache problems with them. In contrast to workers with lower positions, who have less control over their hierarchy at work or work environment, those on an executive level have more power and are usually not functioning under a stressful supervisor.

"They are not being victimized by someone else at work, because they are the people in charge. They don't have that stress going on with them," she said. "If they aren't feeling well, they can just go home or change their schedule. They also have more vacation time."

Not everyone has headaches. Some are lucky and don't get headaches, just like stress. Most people experience headaches under bad circumstances, such as when not eating for a long period of time. Dr. Blake said it's probably a big genetic factor, just like some people smoke cigarettes and don't get lung cancer, although cigarette smoking is clearly a very strong contributor of lung cancer.

Although the neurologist doesn't have a particular age range for her headache patients, she does have more female sufferers.

“Headaches tend to be more common in the female population,” she said. “I see kids and there’s stress at school, which can be a factor, all the way up to people in their 50s and 60s. I have fewer patients who are in their 70s and 80s.”

The vast majority of people with headaches can get relief with the proper treatment, which involves the diagnosis headache type, identifying and removing the trigger for it, and using medications and sometimes other forms of treatment.

Advice for headaches. First, look at a trigger for the headaches. Identify it and then modify or eliminate it. It’s easy to eliminate some things. For instance, if cheese is causing a headache, then don’t eat it. On the other hand, other things are not so easy to eliminate.

“If work stress is the cause, I try to sort of get the patient to figure out what exactly about the work that’s so stressful. Is it the person there? The amount of work you have to do. And then see what options are available to modify it,” said Dr. Blake.

Sometimes a long commute, working from home one day a week, or leaving home early one day a week can be helpful. Again, sometimes there are limited things that a person can do. The doctor admits she had patients to quit their jobs and move on to something new.

“A lot of times people are in a career they just don’t like and they’re frustrated. There’s more of a psychological kind of basis,” she said. “So I try to get them to see a therapist, recommend physical activity, which is a great way to reduce stress. Sometimes medications are needed, but only if a person chose to do other things that has to happen, like the lifestyle changes or the workplace changes. That’s what I would look for in terms of triggers.”

Headache Types. Headaches consist of different types of migraines, tension, deadly headaches, etc., but practically speaking, most people have recurring headaches and people have to take medication for it, especially when becoming nausea with the headache or sensitivity to light. A migraine is the most common cause of recurring headaches. A person experiencing bad headaches from time to time and particularly with nausea or visual disturbances typically has migraines. Migraines can last anywhere from four to 72 hours.

Treatments. A number of medications are available to treat headaches. To treat an acute headache, which is one that has already started and most of the time well tolerated, and there are many medications that can be taken and won’t cause a person to stop functioning. Medicines can also be taken to prevent headaches from occurring. Those medicines are more than likely to cause side affects, and people are a little hesitant about taking them.

“Most headaches are treatable and suffers should see their primary care doctor or neurologist,” said Dr. Blake.

Dr. Blake graduated from medical school in 1990. She practiced her training in Washington at Georgetown for 11 years and has been in practiced for 1 ½ years in Houston.