

Migraines Bossing You Around at Work? Tips to Stay Pain-Free at the Office

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At least 36 million Americans experience migraine headaches, a complex neurobiological condition that can include blinding pain, nausea, light sensitivity, vertigo, and other symptoms.

Migraines affect your quality of life as well as your work productivity. No one wants to burn through sick days, apply for FMLA, or end up on permanent disability. If you're like me and work from home as an entrepreneur, you don't even have sick days to fall back on.

When I was diagnosed in 2013, I was often too sick to work and would lose a day or two in bed to a migraine almost weekly. Once I began implementing some of the strategies below, things improved to where I now have one to three migraine days per month, instead of three to five per week.

Here are seven tips I use to reduce the frequency and severity of migraine attacks at work, along with some strategies from other migraine sufferers.

Wake Up at the Same Time Every Day

I know, it's a bummer to think about regulating your sleep schedule, especially if you look forward to sleeping in on the weekends.

But experts now think that a regular schedule is especially important for migraine brains, so try to figure out how you can go to bed at the same time every night and get up at the same time every day. As a bonus, showing up a little early every day scores you points with the boss.

Skip the Pastry Cart & Learn Your Food Triggers

Sugar highs and lows aren't great for migraine brains. Instead, stock your desk drawer with migraine-friendly, protein-rich snacks like sunflower seeds, [sunflower seed butter](#) and apples, and even high-quality canned fish. Start the day with eggs or a high-protein

smoothie.

Between vending machines and potlucks, there can be a lot of tempting food around the office. It's estimated that 30 to 40% of people who get migraines have specific foods that can trigger an attack. For me it's fermented foods, caffeine, and alcohol.

I learned this by tracking my foods and symptoms while following a plan that excluded all known trigger foods. Some super-healthy foods like avocados, nuts, and onions can be triggers, so if your migraines are bad you might want to learn more.

Keep a Rescue Kit in Your Desk Drawer

I always used to wait, thinking it “might get better,” until my doctor explained that medications like triptans are most effective when taken early in an attack. Be aware, though, that some chronic headaches and migraines can be triggered by over-using medication, including over-the-counter drugs containing caffeine and NSAIDs like ibuprofen and naproxen sodium.

Know what kind of medications work best for you, make sure you always have them handy and take them as soon as you feel an attack coming on.

A healthcare worker told me, “I have an ice pack here and at lunch or breaks I'll ice my head. I also have a Mygrastick — a rollerball of essential oils — that I can put on that helps and is cooling on my forehead and neck. It really impacts my mood above all. With patients I fake smiles and give them the best conversation I can.”

Practice Stress Relief Techniques

Stress is a common migraine trigger, and unfortunately, the workplace tends to be a stressful environment. But there are a few techniques you can practice to keep your nerves under control.

Start the day with yoga before digging into your work.

Step away from your desk to take a quick meditation break in a quiet meeting room.

Try a timer app that gently reminds you shift your eyes away from your monitor, breathe, and stretch.

Leave the stress at work by unplugging at home. Work emails can wait until you're fresh and ready to tackle them at the office.

Get Up and Move

In one study, regular, gentle exercise was found to be just as effective as the leading preventive medication with no negative side effects.

You might explore using a standing desk, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, or sitting on an exercise ball instead of a chair. Check with your company's policy to see if a doctor's note is required for accommodating equipment.

Be Aware of Light Sensitivity

For some people like me, too-bright light or the wrong kind of fluorescents can trigger a migraine attack. If you notice that you're sensitive to bright light, check to see if different bulbs can be installed near your desk or if you can be moved to a location near a window. Another option is light sensitivity glasses designed specifically for migraine. These are designed to block just the portion of the light spectrum that triggers migraine.

A Facebook friend of mine has had to take minutes for a meeting by hand under painful fluorescent lights. Another Facebook friend turned down the brightness on her screen so much that her IT guy thought her monitor was broken.

Sniff it Out

Strong scents trigger migraines for some people. Ask about cleaning supplies used in the office, and be aware that off-gassing from new carpeting and office furniture can be a problem.

If you identify something specific, work with HR to find a solution that works for your employer and you, as they should act to accommodate your needs under the ADA.

One woman I spoke with who works in retail uses a scent that isn't a trigger for her to counteract the scent triggers in her workplace.

When you're well at work, you are at full productivity, allowing you the potential to advance in your field. Following these tips can help reduce the number of sick days you take as well as the amount of medication you use, saving you both pain and money.

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