

# Migraine in the workplace

A guide for employers and managers



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**The Migraine Trust offers free information and support for everyone affected by migraine. Contact our Helpline on 0808 802 0066 (Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm) or through our contact form and Live Chat service at [migrainetrust.org/support](https://migrainetrust.org/support). You can also email us at [info@migrainetrust.org](mailto:info@migrainetrust.org)**

# About this toolkit

Around 1 in 7 people live with migraine. It disproportionately affects adults of working age, and is two to three times more common in women than men. Symptoms of a migraine attack can be debilitating, and as such, migraine can have a huge impact on working life.

Yet, a small amount of support can make a big difference. With often just a few, simple adjustments, most people with migraine are able to manage work more effectively.

Supporting people with migraine at work provides benefits for employees and employers alike, with increased retention, motivation and productivity. Employers may also have a legal duty to support workers, since migraine frequently falls under the criteria to be considered a disability under law.

Despite this, we know that many people with migraine struggle to receive the understanding and support they need at work.

This toolkit is designed to help promote awareness and understanding among employers and explain how to better support people with migraine in the workplace. You can find information about migraine and its impact on work, legal obligations for employers, as well as practical tips on how to support employees with migraine.

**Over a third of people with migraine have felt discriminated against at work due to their migraine.**

**Over half of people with migraine say their workplace has not made reasonable adjustments to support them.**

**Less than half of people with migraine feel that their manager takes their migraine seriously.**

2023 survey conducted by The Migraine Trust in over 1,000 people living with migraine



**“A lot of people with migraine want to work, they don’t want to have this condition ruling their life. So, it’s about supporting people in work, and whether it’s flexible working, reduced hours or duties, there are lots of things that can be done to help people.”**

Nicola

# About migraine

## What is migraine?

Migraine is a complex, painful neurological condition. Although people often think of it as being 'just a headache', it can actually be a whole-body experience. Common symptoms of migraine attacks include:

- moderate to severe throbbing head pain
- problems with sight such as seeing flashing lights
- being very sensitive to light, sounds and smells
- feeling sick and being sick.

Other less common symptoms can include numbness or tingling sensations and speech problems. In vestibular migraine, people also have periods of vertigo or dizziness. Hemiplegic migraine can cause weakness on one side of the body and can be confused with a stroke.

Everyone's experience of migraine is different. For some people, symptoms are so severe, they are barely able to function at all. A migraine attack usually lasts between four hours and three days, but for some it can go on much longer. Some people have occasional attacks, while others live with headache or migraine symptoms most, if not all of the time.

In between migraine attacks, people are usually symptom-free. But living with the uncertainty of another attack can cause ongoing stress and worry. Someone's symptoms may also come and go (fluctuate) or change over time.

## Migraine triggers

Certain things may trigger or increase the risk of a migraine attack. These are different for everyone but can include lack of sleep, missing meals, the weather and changes in hormone levels.

Common work-related triggers for migraine can include:

- lighting, noise and smells in the workplace
- working long hours and lack of regular breaks
- stress
- changes in routine for shift workers.
- screen use

It's not always possible to identify triggers, and it's often a combination of things rather than one single factor that leads to an attack.

## How can people manage their migraine?

People manage their migraine in a number of ways.

- Taking acute or 'rescue' medication, such as painkillers and anti-sickness medicine to stop or shorten an attack. This isn't effective for everyone. And taking painkillers too frequently can lead to medication overuse headache.
- Taking preventive medication. This can help to reduce how many migraine attacks someone gets or how severe they are. But it doesn't usually stop migraine attacks completely, and it can take a long time to find one that works.
- Exploring non-drug treatment options. These include supplements, acupuncture, devices for migraine, relaxation techniques and psychological therapies. These may help some people but don't work for everyone.
- Self-management. Managing any known triggers or making certain lifestyle changes may help some people. But this isn't always possible and it can't stop migraine completely.

# Impact of migraine in the workplace

## Impact on employees

How much impact migraine has on someone's ability to work depends on the type of symptoms the person gets and how severe they are, as well as the particular duties and specifications of their job. It will also depend on what support has been put in place at work. People with migraine can be and are successful in all sorts of different roles and levels of seniority, with the right support in place.

However, it is essential for employers to understand how migraine may affect someone at work. When someone has a migraine attack, their symptoms can make it difficult or impossible to perform their job fully. This can lead to increased time off or not being able to work effectively. Side effects from migraine medication such as drowsiness may affect someone's ability to work effectively too.

Having very frequent or severe attacks can make it difficult for people to stay in employment at all. This can lead to serious consequences, such as poor mental health and financial difficulties. Many people report leaving their job, needing to move from full-time to part-time hours or changing career, due to migraine.

## Impact on businesses and society

Absence and loss of productivity due to migraine has a knock-on effect on businesses and the wider economy too.

People with migraine lose an average of 5.7 work days a year due to migraine.<sup>1</sup>

An estimated 11.4 work days a year are lost per person in migraine-related absence and reduced productivity combined.<sup>2</sup>

The estimated cost to the UK economy per year from time off and lost productivity due to migraine is £8.8 billion.<sup>2</sup>

1. Steiner et al, Cephalalgia. 2003;23(7):519-527

2. The Work Foundation. Society's Headache, 2018.



**“Many people don't know a lot about migraine. I don't think they realise how debilitating migraine attacks can be.”**

Rhianna

## How support from employers can make a difference

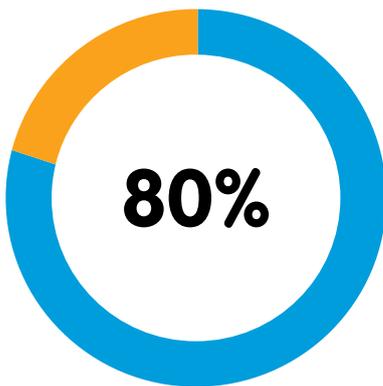
The good news is that with a small amount of support and some adjustments where needed, the majority of people with migraine are better able to manage their migraine in the workplace.

This can have benefits for employees and employers alike.

- For employees: better support in the workplace, increased engagement, higher job satisfaction, improved mental health and financial security.
- For employers: improved staff morale, better retention, higher productivity and potentially higher profitability.
- For businesses and society: less financial burden due to absence and reduced productivity.

In a survey of over 1,200 employees, managers and senior leaders by the Business Disability Forum:<sup>1</sup>

- 80 percent of employees agreed that adjustments helped them to stay in their job and to be more productive.
- more than 60 percent enjoyed their job more due to their adjustments.



**80 percent of employees agreed that adjustments helped them to stay in their job and to be more productive.**



**More than 60 percent enjoyed their job more due to their adjustments.**

Reasonable adjustments can often be low cost or cost nothing at all. They may even save businesses money if they lead to a reduction in sick days or increased productivity. We have more information about reasonable adjustments on page 8.

1. Business Disability Forum. The Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey, 2020.

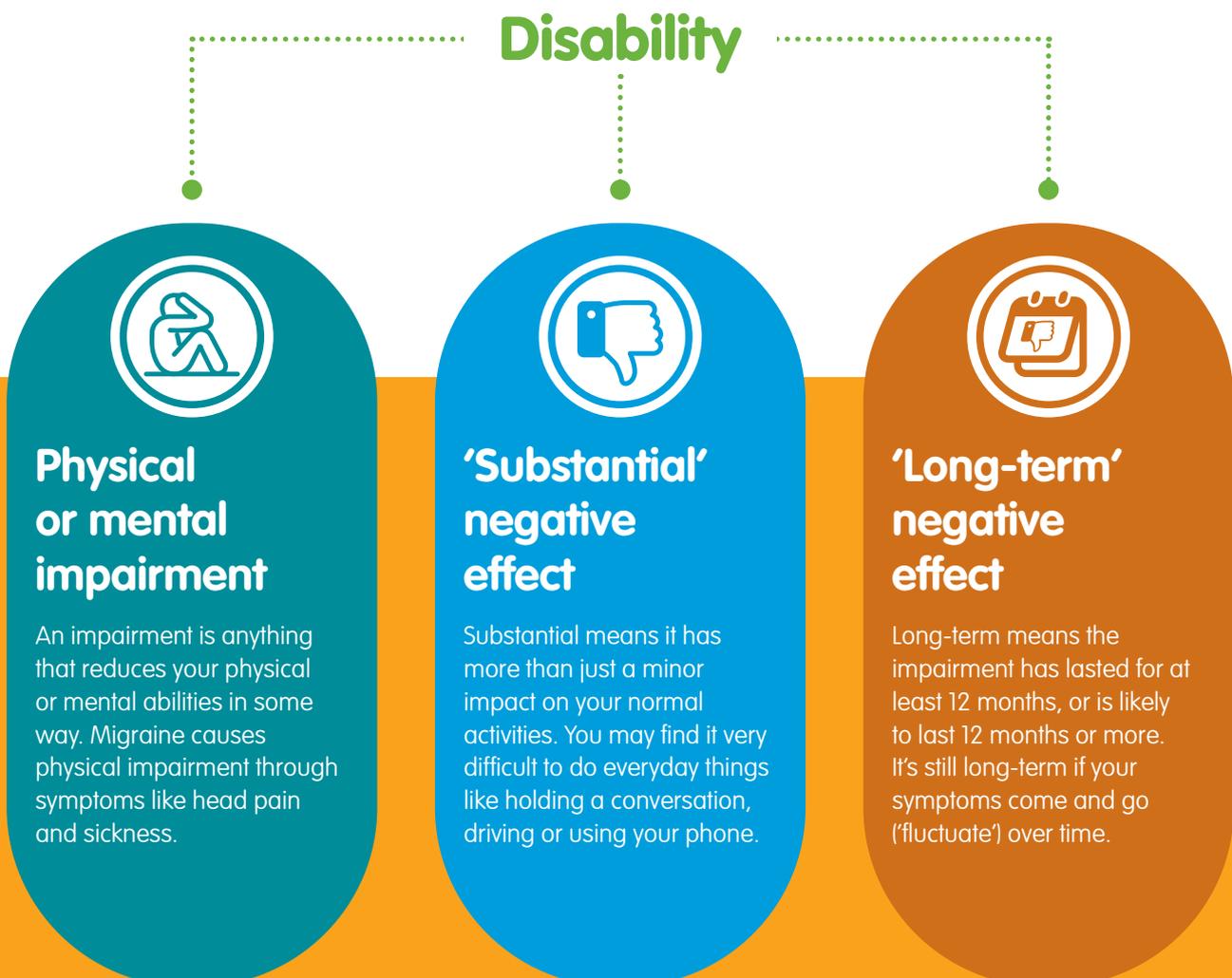
# Legal obligations for employers

## Is migraine a disability?

Many different types of health conditions can be classed as a disability, and this includes migraine. When a health condition is legally defined as a disability it means that person is protected from discrimination under law.

The UK laws relating to disability in the workplace are the [Equality Act 2010](#) in England, Scotland and Wales and the [Disability Discrimination Act 1995](#) in Northern Ireland. These laws define disability as having a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on someone's ability to do normal day-to-day activities.

To be classed as a disability, someone's migraine must fulfil the following criteria.



## What counts?

Whether or not someone's migraine counts as a disability will usually depend on how often they have migraine attacks and how severe they are. Someone who experiences occasional, mild attacks is less likely to be classed as having a disability than someone who has frequent or severe attacks.

The law says to discount any medication or treatment that someone's taking. This means even if someone's migraine is currently well controlled with treatment, it may still count as a disability. This is because if they stopped treatment, their migraine is likely to have a substantial, long-term negative effect.

## How is disability protected under law?

The Equality Act 2010 and Disability Discrimination Act 1995 legally protects someone from discrimination if they have a disability. This includes:

- employees
- people who are self-employed or a contractor, hired personally to do a job
- job applicants
- former employees, for example when applying for references.

**It is against the law to discriminate, harass or victimise someone due to their disability. Discrimination can take several different forms.**

- **Direct discrimination** is when someone is treated unfairly because of their migraine. An example might be that an employee is overlooked for a promotion due to the amount of time they have taken off for migraine.
- **Indirect discrimination** is when someone's needs haven't been considered. An example could be that a new rule is put in place for all staff around break times or remote working, which makes things more difficult for someone with migraine.

## Reasonable adjustments

Under law, employers must make reasonable adjustments in the workplace to support an employee with a disability. These are changes that can help meet someone's needs to make it easier for them to perform their role. They are not aimed at giving that person an advantage, but more about equalising conditions to allow optimal performance for everyone.

Examples can include:

- allowing flexible working or adjusted hours
- changes to the working environment or providing necessary equipment
- changing how you manage sickness absence for someone with migraine.

Employees may make a request for a reasonable adjustment in various ways, such as via email or in a meeting with their manager or employer. But employers or managers can also initiate the conversation.

## What is reasonable?

What counts as 'reasonable' depends on the specific circumstances. You may not be able to make a change if it's impractical, unaffordable or changes the basic nature of the person's job. But if you reject an employee's request, you should be able to provide a good reason why and suggest alternatives instead. The Access to Work grant can help organisations with the costs of making reasonable adjustments.

An occupational health adviser can help with advising on reasonable adjustments. They will fully assess the circumstances, taking account of both the employer's and employee's needs to suggest adjustments that will help. Reasonable adjustments should be regularly reviewed, as someone's needs and circumstances may change over time.

If an employee does not believe they have been treated fairly, they are within their rights to make a formal complaint. It's best to work together with the individual to come to an agreement on what adjustments are possible and would help meet their needs.

We have more information on reasonable adjustments that might help people with migraine on page 11.

## Disclosure of migraine as a disability

It's important to know that an employee does not need to formally disclose a disability for it to be covered under law. They may choose not to inform their employer, or they may not realise it counts as a disability. However, the legal obligations as an employer stand if you could 'reasonably be expected to know' that they have a disability.

It may feel unclear whether someone's migraine should be classed as a disability. However, the most important thing is to focus on the impact migraine is having on the person and what support you can offer. We have more advice about talking to employees on page 11. Whether or not it is a disability, making adjustments to help them feel and perform their best at work will be good for the person and the organisation as a whole.

If an employee wishes to provide evidence they may choose to share a diary showing how their migraine affects them. They may also provide a doctor's letter to give more information about their migraine. This may explain:

- how long the person has had migraine and how long it's expected to last
- what would happen if they stopped any medication they're taking
- the effect their migraine has on their everyday activities.

Medical documentation such as this is only helpful as part of the disability disclosure process. It's not needed and shouldn't be requested for individual instances of migraine attacks.

It can also be helpful for employers to offer a referral to an occupational health adviser. An occupational health adviser can give independent and impartial advice on the impact of health conditions at work and assess the person's needs. It's important to reassure employees that an occupational health assessment is confidential.



**"I think it's important for managers to know that it doesn't have to be a large change – small changes and adjustments are great to help someone to get through the working day when they do have a migraine attack."**

Misba

# Building a disability-friendly workplace

People with migraine often feel guilty, embarrassed or worried about revealing they have migraine to an employer. This is due to the stigma that often comes with the condition. It's important to aim for an open and supportive culture in the workplace, where people feel able to talk to managers about any health-related needs.

Part of this includes taking any necessary measures to make sure you are a disability-friendly organisation. This can include employing people with disabilities, talking about disability, and ensuring your workplace is accessible for all.

## Policies and procedures

Another way to build an open and supportive culture is to ensure as an organisation, you are transparent about policies and practices. Because of the stigma associated with disabilities, many employees might feel safer accessing information anonymously before approaching their manager or HR department.

Information about how to request reasonable adjustments should be easy to find and easy to understand for all employees. It should also be published in accessible formats. Having a clear process can make it easier and more efficient for employers to navigate as well as decreasing any anxiety about an unknown and stressful process for employees.

## Talking to employees about migraine

If you believe that an employee has migraine, encourage them to talk to you in confidence about any support they may need. Reassure them that they do not need to share private medical information, and that any discussions can remain confidential. Suggest regular check-ins so you can stay aware of any changes.

The following can be important timepoints to discuss migraine.

- During recruitment – you can ask candidates during the interview or recruitment process whether they have any specific needs or require adjustments.
- If someone reveals during their employment that they have migraine – this can be a good time to ask if any aspects of work make their migraine worse.
- If the severity or frequency of someone's migraine attacks has changed – meaning they are unable to work effectively or need time off.
- If someone's role or work environment has changed, and this may have a detrimental effect on their migraine.
- During an employee's return-to-work meeting if they have been off sick.

Showing that you are supportive and willing to work together to find a solution is an important first step.

We have different resources that can help with conversations at work about migraine, including our managing your migraine at work checklist and migraine information for workplaces factsheet. You can download them from our website at [migrainetrust.org/resources](https://migrainetrust.org/resources)



**“Back of the mind it's: how do I mention to them that this is something I suffer? When it happens, what will I go and say? How will I handle it?”**

Arvind

# How to support employees with migraine

Employees who are supported are more likely to feel valued, which can help boost morale, productivity and retention across the whole organisation.

The following are examples of adjustments that may help people with migraine at work. It's important to discuss potential adjustments with the person concerned. What may help will depend on someone's specific symptoms and triggers. This can be different for everybody.

## Work environment and equipment

- Position people away from bright or flickering lights and ensure any lighting issues are fixed quickly. Desk lamps can often be better than overhead lighting.
- Natural light can be better, but if near a window, use blinds to reduce glare.
- Anti-glare screens and blue light filters can help to reduce screen glare.
- Tinted glasses or safety glasses can be helpful for people who work outside or are affected by lighting in the workplace.
- Keep the workplace well-ventilated and a comfortable temperature.
- Earplugs or ear defenders can help if noise is an issue and can't be avoided.
- Ensure there is easy access to drinking water to prevent dehydration.
- For desk-based employees, make sure the desk, screen and chair are at the right height to allow good posture and prevent neck or back pain.

## Workplace practices and procedures

- Provide clear objectives, give adequate support and make sure workloads are achievable to reduce stress.
- Consider flexible or remote working if this would help with time management, stress or workplace triggers.
- Ensure employees can have regular, flexible breaks as needed.
- Allow rotation of tasks or regular breaks from tasks that may trigger migraine attacks.
- Limit online meetings, allow employees to opt out of being on camera, or consider alternative ways to connect for employees who find video calls an issue.
- Avoid unnecessary meetings and travel that may disrupt someone's usual routine.
- Avoid unplanned overtime or shift work.
- Allow time off for medical appointments.
- Make changes to how sickness absence related to migraine is managed.

Here are some examples of positive changes in the workplace that have made a difference to people with migraine.



“**Cleaning products** used in the office used to trigger really bad migraine attacks – I used to be **physically sick at work**. I requested to work two days a week from home so I’m taken away from those smells and that helped massively.”

Sandip



“One of the major issues that I had working in a large laboratory was the **bright fluorescent lighting**; I overcame this by wearing **migraine glasses**. The laboratory can also be extremely noisy – I wear **earplugs which help to drown out the background noise**.”

Misba



“**Screens often make my migraine attacks worse** or can trigger a migraine attack. When I worked at the call centre, they made sure that all of the **blue screen filters** were on my screen so it could be as kind on my eyes as possible.”

Amelia



## Coping with a migraine attack

Despite anyone's best efforts, migraine attacks can't always be avoided. Some people may feel able to carry on working with a migraine attack, perhaps after having a rest and taking medication. Others may be OK if they're able to switch tasks. But for some people, their symptoms may make it impossible to work effectively, if at all.

It's useful to plan in advance how to support someone if they do have a migraine attack during work time. When there is a lack of support from managers or colleagues, people may feel like it's harder to cope. This can make things worse, or delay recovery.

Here are some things to consider.

- What tasks the person can or can't manage during a migraine attack.
- If there is access to a quiet, dark space where they can rest and take medication when symptoms start.
- If there is someone who can provide immediate cover if necessary (depending on job requirements).
- How quickly someone may need to go home when a migraine attack starts, and how they would get home safely.
- What the risks are in job roles involving operating machinery, driving, caring for people or being responsible for children.

## Taking time off for migraine

Working during a migraine attack may just not be possible in some cases. It's important to support people in taking the time that they need to recover. As well as being empathetic to people's needs, this may also mean promoting awareness and understanding among team members.

No-one should ever feel pressured to carry on working if they are struggling with migraine symptoms. This can lead to 'presenteeism' – when someone continues to be in work but is unable to perform their job effectively. Presenteeism can delay recovery and contribute to 'burnout' at work.

People may also need to take time off as they recover from a migraine attack. This is called the 'postdrome' stage and can take days for some people.

Considering reasonable adjustments around sickness absence is one way an employer can support staff with taking time off. This might include discounting a certain amount of sickness leave related to migraine or extending the limits for when sickness absences might trigger a review.



**"It really hurt me to know my colleagues were aware I had migraine but still thought I was just faking it so I could get a week off. People often don't understand migraine and the effect it can have on your mental and physical wellbeing."**

Conner

# When someone is unable to perform their job

If someone with migraine is not performing their job to expected standards, it's important to first determine whether there are any reasonable adjustments you can make that would support them in their role.

If you still have concerns, you must then carry out a legally-compliant capability or performance procedure before deciding if any further action is needed. This aims to ensure that a fair and reasonable process is followed. It involves talking to the employee about their migraine and gathering any evidence of reasonable adjustments that have been made. Any medical or occupational health reports should also be considered.

Formal performance management or dismissal should be a last resort only if after any support has been put in place, the person is still unable to carry out their job effectively.

An employee can make an employment tribunal claim if they believe they have been unfairly dismissed due to migraine. This is why it's important to work together to try and reach the best outcome for all concerned.

Acas has more information on capability and performance management when someone is disabled. See our Further information section for details.

Legally, employers are not allowed to do the following, just because of a person's disability:

- discipline someone
- dismiss someone
- make someone redundant
- force someone to retire or resign.



# How The Migraine Trust can help in your workplace

Our **support services** are here for everyone with migraine. We offer information and support on managing your migraine in the workplace, but we are unable to provide specific legal advice. Find out more at [migrainetrust.org/support](https://migrainetrust.org/support)

We have a range of information and resources for both employees and employers, including our managing your migraine at work checklist and migraine information for workplaces factsheet. Find out more at [migrainetrust.org/migraineandwork](https://migrainetrust.org/migraineandwork)

## Want to make a difference in your workplace?

You can:

- share our resources and details of the support services we offer
- sign The Migraine Trust's workplace pledge
- book a migraine awareness session for staff
- host a fundraising event at work
- match any fundraising by employees for The Migraine Trust
- become a Corporate Partner of The Migraine Trust.

See [migrainetrust.org/workplace](https://migrainetrust.org/workplace) to find out more.

# Further information

## Acas

Acas (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) gives free, impartial advice about workplace rights, rules and best practice. Acas also advise and provide assistance to help settle employment disputes.

- Helpline: 0300 123 1100
- [acas.org.uk](https://www.acas.org.uk)

## Citizens Advice

Provides practical information and advice on a range of issues relating to work, for people living in England, Scotland and Wales.

- [citizensadvice.org.uk](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

## Equality and Human Rights Commission

Independent statutory body responsible for enforcing the Equality Act 2010 in England, Scotland and Wales. Provides expert information, advice and support on discrimination and human rights issues.

- [equalityhumanrights.com](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

## Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Provides general information and advice about equality legislation in Northern Ireland.

- Tel: 028 90 500 589
- [equalityni.org](https://www.equalityni.org)

## gov.uk

Contains a wide range of general information about government services including disability rights information, sickness pay and handling employment disputes. It also provides general information about welfare benefits and the Access to Work scheme.

- [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk)

## Labour Relations Agency

Providing free, impartial advice and services relating to employment practice in Northern Ireland.

- [lra.org.uk](https://www.lra.org.uk)

## nidirect

Government services in Northern Ireland, including disability rights and discrimination.

- [nidirect.gov.uk](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk)

Please note that the inclusion of any organisation in this list does not constitute a recommendation or endorsement by The Migraine Trust. We have provided these for information purposes only.

## About The Migraine Trust

The Migraine Trust is dedicated to helping people affected by migraine. We are the only UK migraine charity providing information and support, campaigning for awareness and change, and funding and promoting research.

Visit our website to subscribe to email updates and news, access migraine information and to learn more about The Migraine Trust including our support services, research and events.

 [www.migrainetrust.org](http://www.migrainetrust.org)

 **Helpline 0808 802 0066**

Have you found this information helpful, or is there anything missing? Let us know by following the QR code to complete our feedback survey. You can also email any feedback to:

**[feedback@migrainetrust.org](mailto:feedback@migrainetrust.org)**



This information has been written by The Migraine Trust Information and Support Services team and reviewed by our reviewer panel.

Our information has been awarded the PIF TICK quality mark for trustworthy health information.



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the  
**migraine**  
trust

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