Why We Need to Raise Migraine Awareness

by BARBARA LEECH

The Importance of Migraine Awareness

Even with all the documented facts out there regarding migraine headache and how it impacts a person's life, work, and family, there are still many people who do not seem to know the condition is not the same as a regular headache.

If you suffer from migraine, you are part of the ranks of more than 35 million other sufferers in the United States who get frequent migraines.

According to the Migraine Research Foundation (MRF), a Manhattan-based nonprofit organization that offers support and information, these excruciating headaches affect more women than men, with about 18 percent of females afflicted versus six percent of men.

Given these statistics, the lack of knowledge often expressed by those who have never had a migraine is shocking.

Many seem to think it is just a bad headache, so there is no reason for missing work or canceling your plans. Sufferers can be seen as weak or someone who enjoys complaining and attention.

This is so far from the truth. Migraine is a debilitating, neurological condition that affects millions of people and can negatively impact one's quality of life, work, relationships and daily functioning. Raising awareness can help to put an end to the myths and help the population to have a better understanding of what a migraine is a how it affects daily life. Awareness within the home can help loved ones understand how to care for someone with a migraine.

Migraine Versus a Headache

Science has proven there is a difference between a migraine vs headache. Here are a few differences to remember:

- With an ordinary headache, what typically occurs is a narrowing of blood vessels within the head, which can be eased by taking over-the-counter aspirin or other pain relievers.
- Migraines are caused by the swelling and expansion of blood vessels, and though certain treatments may provide migraine relief, there is no cure and many remedies simply do not work on this level of pain.
- Some migraines last for 72 hours, versus a bad headache lasting for an afternoon.

And this general lack of awareness regarding the facts actually extends to the medical community. The World Health Organization (WHO) stated in a 2011 report that, "Lack of knowledge among health-care providers is the principal clinical barrier to effective headache (including migraine) management."

According to this report, a deficit in education is the cause, since non-specialist physician undergraduate medical training included only four hours regarding headache and migraine, and specialist (neurologist) training included 10 hours.

It is not unheard of for some patients to have their migraine symptoms dismissed as stress, premenstrual syndrome (PMS) or depression.

Perhaps you may have encountered a few doctors who were not well versed in the latest studies of this chronic condition.

Often when a sufferer first appeals to their doctor for help, the physician may miss the typical cluster of symptoms, like severe headache, nausea, vomiting, visual disturbances, and sensitivity to noises and smells. Sometimes, just getting diagnosed is an accomplishment.

Since it occurs most often in women, it is also easy for people to forget men get migraines as well. But, the only reason it is believed to be more prevalent in females is women have more incidents in their lives where their hormones fluctuate (menstruation, menopause, pregnancy) than men do.

Higher estrogen levels sometimes improve migraines, and lower levels may make them worse, according to the Mayo Clinic.

So, the other misconception that it is a 'hysterical female' issue has been put to rest by science. For both men and women, emotional periods in their lives and stress may release chemicals that provoke migraine-causing vascular expansion in the brain, according to Harvard Medical School's Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC).

What Are the Essential Facts Everyone Should Know?

It is important for everyone to know the facts. Migraine begins with a physiological (not psychological) trigger, which causes the cranial blood vessels to dilate, and nerve endings to release chemical neurotransmitters.

The result is incredible, unbearable nerve pain and increased sensation to the other senses, so light, noise and movement make the pain worsen.

Next page: what do migraines actually feel like?

What Are the Essential Facts Everyone Should Know?

You do not need to experience an aura for it to be migraine. An aura is a neurological symptom in which you have temporary visual, sensory, and/or language disturbances with or without pain. Only about one-third of migraine sufferers experience an aura.

With a migraine comes multiple symptoms and one over-the-counter pain medicine won't necessarily help. There are more than 100 treatments for migraines; if the solution were one pill, everyone would be buying it.

In addition, painkillers are often not the most effective treatment, experts say. They don't help with things that make a migraine worse, like bright light, movement, or noise — and they do not relieve nausea.

Pain relievers such as ibuprofen and acetaminophen help relieve mild migraine symptoms, but they shouldn't be used to treat moderate or severe migraines, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Typically Prescribed Medications

- **Botox:** Multiple studies concluded that Botox is safe and effective for the prevention of chronic migraines

in adults.

- **Dexamethasone**: This corticosteroid reduces inflammation and may be used with other medications for migraine pain relief; it's taken infrequently because of the risk of side effects.
- **Triptans**: They work with brain chemistry to constrict blood vessels, helping relieve migraine pain, nausea and sensitivity to light and sound.
- **Beta-blockers**: Commonly used to treat high blood pressure and coronary heart disease, these drugs can reduce the frequency and severity of migraines in some, but may make it worse for others.
- **Cefaly:** Provides reduced pain and eventually can prevent migraines. It is a small battery-powered prescription device that resembles a plastic headband and delivers an electric current to head to stimulate branches of the trigeminal nerve, which has been associated with migraine headaches. The experiences tingling where the electrode is applied and it is used once per day for 20 minutes.
- **Ergot**: These combine caffeine with ergotamine, another blood-vessel constrictor, and work best in patients who have pain lasting more than 48 hours.
- **Tricyclic antidepressants**: This form of antidepressant medication may help prevent migraines by altering brain chemistry, whether or not you have depression.
- **Anti-nausea medications**: These help with the migraine symptoms of nausea and vomiting.

What Does Migraine Typically Feel Like?

Awareness about what a migraine sufferer might be going through can work wonders in easing the challenges and stress they face in any given week.

Do you wonder why your coworker calls in sick from work when they have a migraine? Here is what may have prompted that call.

A migraine sufferer may, for example, wake up and feel like their head (or part of it) is under extreme pressure. Once they get up and begin their day, it soon feels like one side of the head has something ready to burst within it.

We are talking "I wonder if this is an aneurism?" kind of pain. The sunshine on the way to work is torture and increases their pain even more. Moving their head sends shockwaves of pain through them and they are nauseous or vomiting by the time they arrive at work. Then, once the initial pain of a migraine passes — however long that may take — there can be a period of recovery time afterwards when they have to deal with postdrome symptoms like continued pressure in the head, weakness, and confusion.

For those of us who battle chronic migraines, one of the most exhausting and sometimes upsetting parts of dealing with your condition is combatting the lack of awareness rampant among your friends, family and coworkers.

Many people are quick to judge if they have not experienced migraine pain themselves. It is bad enough to suffer without having to contend with misinformation that belittles your battle and accuses you of making too much of "just a headache." It is so much more and it is very important for those who get migraines to be understood and respected.

Greater Awareness Matters

So, spreading awareness is critical for the typical perception about migraine to finally change. Migraine pain may affect the head, but it is not all in your head.

Sufferers are not being overly dramatic or seeking attention — the pain and its triggers are very real and life altering. Awareness is needed in both the general public and the medical community if there is any hope for better treatment and emotional support for this painful condition.