



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

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Migraines Don't Have to Be a Headache for Employers

by Laura Snyder

It's a late fall afternoon and the sun is setting. A transit driver headed for her last stop for the day turns west down a tree-lined street. As the sun filters through tree branches, the driver is hit by a strobe-light effect. A wave of nausea warns her that a migraine is on the way.

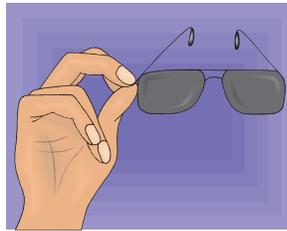
Migraines affect about six percent of men and 18 percent of women, adding up to about 36 million people in the United States, according to MAGNUM, a national migraine awareness group. Migraines are also in the top 20 most debilitating diseases in the world. Driving with a migraine is dangerous for both the driver and the passengers, but missed work due to migraines can really add up. How can an agency work with an employee suffering from migraines to minimize the occurrences and maximize productivity?

Migraine myths & facts

Migraine sufferers might not bring their condition to the attention of supervisors for fear of discrimination based on myths, says Michael John Coleman, director of MAGNUM. For instance, the myth that migraines are caused by stress lays blame on the sufferer for lack of control in his or her life. In fact, during a migraine, the blood vessels in the brain dilate, says Coleman, but when a person is under stress, the body's blood vessels constrict. Drugs that stop migraines actually bring on

the physiology of a stress attack by constricting the blood vessels in the brain.

Because bright lights tend to aggravate migraines, many "migraineurs" as MAGNUM calls them, will wear dark glasses, even indoors. They may also walk with a slight stagger, which Coleman says has no



Many people who suffer from migraines wear sunglasses, even indoors.

effect on a person's ability to operate gas and brake pedals in a vehicle. This kind of behavior sometimes leads employers to suspect employees of being drug addicts or alcoholics instead of migraineurs.

Migraines do not affect everyone equally. Migraines are caused by a poly-genetic disease that can originate from one, two, or three genes in a migraineur. A person who rarely suffers from migraines or has mild symptoms may only have one gene involved, while another person who frequently shows intense symptoms may have all three genes involved.

Not all migraine sufferers have headaches, either. Headaches are a

symptom, says Coleman, but they do not necessarily always accompany migraines. Some people will never have headaches but suffer from nausea instead.

ADA protection?

Coleman says migraines, like epilepsy, are an episodic disability protected

under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) depending on the severity and frequency of the condition. Tommy Thompson, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, classified migraines as a disability in a letter to the International Headache Congress in 2003.

Transit employers or human resources staff can help migraine sufferers by taking a proactive approach. Employers should talk with employees and make them feel comfortable discussing medical issues that might affect their jobs. Employers should also learn to recognize some common migraine symptoms, which will help prevent employers from

making mistaken assumptions that an employee is using drugs or alcohol.

Reasonable accommodations for employees should be made, but if an employee is frequently missing work due to migraines, Coleman advises that a human resources person suggest the employee visit a neurologist for treatment. Preventative drugs such as Topamax or Depakote ER, along with learning to avoid migraine triggers such as Aspartame or MSG in foods, may reduce occurrences of migraines.

If your employee is using prescribed medicine for migraines it is important for him or her to check with a doctor to see if the medication will interfere with driving. Your employee should also report the prescription drugs to his or her supervisor or designated human resource person. For more information about migraines and the ADA, visit www.migraines.org.

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