

Migraine makes its way to WHO's list of top 20 disabilities

By Vithal C. Nadkarni
Times News Network

MUMBAI: Migraine has been identified as one of the world's top 20 causes of disability, according to the latest report on mental health released by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The landmark report, *New Understanding, New Hope*, establishes the burden of headache for the first time, based on information on the malady collected from around the world.

"This could have a far-reaching impact not only on individual sufferers, their caregivers, families and colleagues, but on society itself," says Dr K. Ravishankar, who is in charge of Jaslok Hospital's headache and migraine clinic and who served as a consultant from India for the WHO report. "Hopefully, the report will provide the necessary impetus for long-awaited support strategies," he adds.

The WHO report defines the burden of maladies such as migraines and unipolar depression as including the economic and emotional difficulties that a family experiences as a result of the disorder as well as the lost opportunities—the adjustments and compromises that prevent other family members from achieving their full potential at work, in social relationships and in leisure activities.

Although neurological and psychiatric disorders

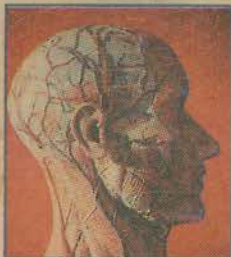
comprise only 1.4 per cent of all deaths, they account for a sizeable 28 per cent of life lived with a disability. The WHO study, therefore, provides compelling evidence that one cannot assess the neurological health status of a population by examining mortality statistics alone. Migraine is a common neurological disorder affecting approximately ten to 15 per cent of the global population.

Migraine headaches are thought to be the result of a complex cyclic interaction between the trigeminal nerve and the blood vessels in the cranium, although the exact mechanism remains somewhat unclear.

In its most typical form, the malady is characterised by a gradual build-up of a throbbing headache that lasts from a few hours to a whole day. It may also be accompanied by nausea, vomiting and intolerance for light and sound.

Individuals affected by migraine are thought to have a genetic predisposition to the disorder. The onset of a migraine occurs when such persons encounter a trigger—stress, hormonal changes, fatigue, certain foods, caffeine, alcohol and changes in weather or barometric pressure. Additional triggers include artificial sweeteners, perfumes and physical exertion.

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More women suffer from migraine than men: study

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MUMBAI: The prevalence of migraine peaks at about the age of 40, affecting sufferers during their most productive years, and the condition frequently impacts on the quality of life. An American study on migraines has found, for instance, that one-third of the burden of migraine at work is reflected in absenteeism, while two-thirds is evident in reduced effectiveness at work.

The study shows that 51 per cent of women and 38 per cent of men who suffer migraines lose the equivalent of six or more days per year due to the ailment. The indirect costs often greatly exceed the direct ones.

According to the WHO report, migraine is estimated to account for two per cent of the years of life lost due to disability in women of all ages. In both sexes of all ages, migraine is responsible for 1.4 per cent of total years of life lost due to a disorder. According to Dr Ravishankar, "This is a quantitative way of assessing functional disability. For the average chronic female migraineur, for example, who has an average life-span of 63 years, the migraine may mar as many as 1.2 years of her productive lifetime. And this is quite significant if you take into account major opportunities for cost-effective therapeutic interventions which reduce the burden of this common disease.

"These human aspects of migraine are more difficult to assess and quantify, the report admits, but are nevertheless vital to understanding fully the implications of the disorder," Dr Ravishankar continues. "Also, it uses the basic concept of what's known as the Global Burden of Disease (GBD). This is an analysis of the onset of disorders and the disability they cause.

"Using the GBD method, the WHO report identifies six neuropsychiatric disorders among the top 20 causes of disability in the world. These are unipolar depressive disorders, alcohol use disorders, schizophrenia, bipolar affective disorder, Alzheimer's and other dementias, and migraine. The final results of the study are to be published later this year."

Says Dr Noshir H. Wadia, director of Jaslok Hospital's department of neurology, "The WHO's recognition of migraine as a major global disorder is a big step forward in relieving the burden caused by headache around the world. The next step will be to develop global and regional education programmes that will increase public awareness of headache disorders and to increase research for the development of effective headache therapies. It's also time that interested Indian neurologists form a group to study the burden of headache in our own setting, keeping in mind the divergent cultural, environmental and genetic backgrounds."

(This is the first piece in a series on migraines.)