

Office initiative reduces headaches and neck and shoulder pain by more than 40 percent

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Office staff who took part in an eight-month workplace initiative reported that headaches and neck and shoulder pain fell by more than 40 per cent and their use of painkillers halved, according to research published in the May issue of *Cephalalgia*.

They also reported that pain levels were less severe at the end of the study than at the start.

Italian researchers compared 169 staff in Turin's registry and tax offices with 175 colleagues who hadn't taken part in the educational and physical programme. Using daily diaries completed by both groups, they compared the baseline results for months one and two of the study with months seven and eight to see if there had been any changes. The study group started following the programme in month three.

They found that:

- At the start of the study, staff in both groups reported an average of six headache days a month and seven and a half days when they were affected by neck and shoulder pain. They needed to take analgesic drugs two days a month.

- By the end of the trial, staff in the study group reported that they suffered from 41 per cent fewer headaches, with staff in the control group reporting a negligible rise of 0.02 per cent.

-- Study group staff also reported 43 per cent less neck and shoulder pain, compared with staff in the control group who reported a five per cent reduction.

-- When it came to medication, the study group reported a 51 per cent reduction in analgesic use and the control group reported a fall of 15 per cent.

-- Subjects with anxiety or depression showed a better than average response when compared with the rest of the study group.

The researchers were also keen to see whether the workplace initiative also reduced the ‘global burden’ of the employee’s headaches and neck and shoulder pain, which is calculated by multiplying intensity by frequency. They found that:

-- Employees in the study group reported a 41 per cent reduction in headache burden, compared with a two per cent fall for the control group.

-- The burden of neck and shoulder pain was 54 per cent lower in the study group by the end of the study, with the control group recording a reduction of four per cent.

“Staff in the study group were asked to carry out a series of relaxation and posture exercises every two to three hours and provided with red labels to place around their work area to remind them to avoid excessive contraction of their head and shoulder muscles” explains lead author Professor Franco Mongini from the Headache and Facial Pain Unit at the University of Turin, Italy.

“The exercises also included two daily periods of ten to 15 minutes when staff relaxed quietly at home in a comfortable armchair with warming

pads placed on their cheeks and shoulders.”

The programme was designed by the lead author and was explained using a short film, followed by a practical demonstration and training.

Staff were also provided with information sheets on the exercises and the clinician leading the study revisited the workplace in months four and six to remind staff of the procedures.

The study and control groups were based in separate offices to avoid cross contamination of the results. 90 per cent of the 384 employees who agreed to take part completed the study. Most were female (80 per cent), with an average age of 46.

“Headache and neck and shoulder pain are both a clinical challenge and a major health problem” stresses Professor Mongini, whose research was primarily funded by the Compagnia di San Paolo in Turin, with additional funding from Region Piemonte.

“Last year Cephalalgia published a study by Stovner et al that suggested that the worldwide prevalence of headache was as high as 46 per cent in adults, with 11 per cent suffering from migraine, 42 per cent from tension headaches and three per cent from chronic daily headaches.

“Our study clearly shows that workplace interventions can reduce headaches and neck and shoulder pain.

“The methods adopted were relatively simple and the positive response from the employees, including the low study drop-out rate, suggest that it would prove popular in other workplaces.

“We also believe that employers would support this low-cost initiative as it would improve productivity in the workplace.”

Source: Wiley

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