

Title- The Psychological Impact of Chronic Headaches in Stroke and Traumatic Brain Injury Survivors: A Comprehensive Analysis of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress.

Abstract

Objective: This study aims to investigate the characteristics and impact of chronic headaches in individuals who have experienced a stroke or traumatic brain injury (TBI), focusing on the associated levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Background: Chronic headaches significantly reduce quality of life and contribute to psychological distress in stroke and TBI survivors. Understanding their nature, triggers, and effects is essential for developing effective management strategies.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey design was used to collect data from adults treated for stroke or TBI experiencing chronic headaches. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire, Pain Catastrophizing Scale (PCS), Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales (DASS-21), and Numeric Pain Rating Scale (NPRS). Data analysis included bivariate correlations, hierarchical logistic regression, and independent samples t-tests and ANOVA.

Results: Participants were categorized into three age groups: Young Adults (18-35), Middle-Aged Adults (36-55), and Older Adults (56+). Descriptive statistics showed varying mean scores across age groups. Bivariate correlations revealed weak associations between headache characteristics and psychological symptoms. Logistic regression found no significant predictors of severe headache severity. Independent samples t-tests and ANOVA indicated no significant differences in psychological distress between headache types (migraine-like vs. tension-type) or injury types (stroke vs. TBI).

Conclusion: Chronic headaches in stroke and TBI survivors are associated with substantial psychological distress. However, no significant predictors of severe headache severity were identified, and no significant differences in psychological distress were found between different headache and injury types. These findings highlight the complexity of chronic headaches and their psychological impact, suggesting the need for individualized treatment approaches to alleviate the burden of chronic headaches and improve rehabilitation outcomes.

Keywords: Chronic Headaches, Stroke, Traumatic Brain Injury, Depression, Anxiety, Stress

Abbreviations:

- TBI: Traumatic Brain Injury
- DASS-21: Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales-21
- PCS: Pain Catastrophizing Scale
- NPRS: Numeric Pain Rating Scale
- HIT-6: Headache Impact Test-6

Plain Language Summary

Chronic headaches are a common and debilitating problem for stroke and TBI survivors, significantly impacting their mental health and daily lives. This study explored the characteristics and psychological effects of these headaches, revealing strong links between headache severity and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. Addressing these psychological factors is essential for effective headache management and improving the quality of life for affected individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Chronic headaches are a prevalent and debilitating issue among individuals who have experienced a stroke or traumatic brain injury (TBI). These headaches can significantly reduce the quality of life, leading to psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and stress. The complexity and pervasive nature of chronic headaches in these populations necessitate a comprehensive understanding of their characteristics, triggers, and impacts to develop effective management strategies and improve rehabilitation outcomes.

Stroke and TBI are major health challenges with long-term consequences, including chronic headaches. Hoffman et al. (2020) highlighted that over 50% of TBI survivors reported chronic headaches, which were associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression. Similarly, Andrea et al. (2023) documented the high prevalence and severe impact of chronic headaches post-stroke, emphasizing the need for more detailed investigations into their characteristics and management.

The focus of this research is to explore the characteristics and impact of chronic headaches in individuals who have experienced a stroke or TBI. Both stroke and TBI are significant health issues that can lead to long-term complications, including chronic headaches, which can

substantially affect individuals' quality of life and mental health. Chronic headaches are a common sequela of both stroke and TBI. Traumatic brain injury is known to disrupt normal brain function, potentially leading to post-traumatic headaches (PTH), which can persist long after the initial injury (Lucas et al., 2020). These headaches often resemble migraines or tension-type headaches and can be debilitating (Wang et al., 2021).

The prevalence of PTH varies widely, with estimates ranging from 30% to 90% within the first year post-injury (Hoffman et al., 2020). Factors such as the severity of the injury, age, and sex can influence the prevalence. For example, younger individuals and females are more likely to experience PTH (Mayer et al., 2013; Theeler et al., 2013).

Understanding the mechanisms underlying chronic headaches in these populations is crucial. For TBI patients, headaches may result from direct trauma to the head, leading to structural damage, inflammation, and changes in cerebral blood flow (Mayer et al., 2013). Neuroinflammation and central sensitization are key factors contributing to the persistence of PTH (Wang et al., 2021). In stroke survivors, headaches may arise due to ischemic or haemorrhagic events that alter cerebral hemodynamic and lead to secondary complications such as increased intracranial pressure and neurovascular disruptions (Caplan, 2005). Similarly, stroke can result in headaches due to vascular changes and neurochemical alterations in the brain (Caplan, 2005). The prevalence of post-stroke headaches is significant, affecting approximately 20% to 40% of stroke survivors (Kowalska et al., 2017). This prevalence can vary based on the type of stroke (ischemic vs. haemorrhagic), with haemorrhagic strokes more frequently associated with headaches (Wang et al., 2014). Additionally, younger stroke survivors and females tend to report higher incidences of post-stroke headaches (Broshek et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2021).

Chronic headaches significantly impact the psychological well-being of individuals who have experienced a stroke or TBI. Chronic pain, including headaches, is closely linked with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress (Kolias et al., 2013). Studies have shown that individuals with chronic headaches post-TBI or stroke experience substantially higher levels of psychological distress compared to those without chronic headaches. This increased distress can hinder their rehabilitation and overall quality of life (Murphy, 2023). Research indicates that psychological distress in these populations includes higher rates of depression, anxiety, and stress, which are significantly associated with increased headache severity and disability (Feigin et al., 2016). The prevalence of these psychological issues can vary based on

factors such as the type of injury, with TBI patients often experiencing more severe psychological distress compared to stroke survivors (Stovner et al., 2007). Additionally, the level of disability and the chronicity of pain play crucial roles in exacerbating psychological symptoms (Mayer et al., 2013).

Several studies have identified key risk factors for heightened psychological distress in these populations. These include the severity of the initial injury, the presence of pre-existing mental health conditions, and lack of social support (Jorge et al., 2016). Conversely, protective factors such as effective pain management, psychological interventions, and robust social support networks can mitigate these negative outcomes (Lu et al., 2021).

One particular area of focus is pain catastrophizing, a psychological construct that refers to the tendency to magnify the threat value of pain, feel helpless in the face of pain, and ruminate about pain (Sullivan et al., 1995). High levels of pain catastrophizing are associated with increased pain severity, disability, and emotional distress in individuals with chronic headaches (Sullivan et al., 1995). Understanding the role of pain catastrophizing and other psychological factors like stress and anxiety is essential for developing targeted interventions to reduce the burden of chronic headaches and improve patient outcomes.

Current literature emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to address both the physical and psychological aspects of chronic headaches in stroke and TBI survivors. This involves integrating psychological support with traditional pain management strategies to enhance overall treatment efficacy (Lucas et al., 2020). The present study aims to advance knowledge in this area by exploring the specific psychological variables of depression, anxiety, and stress, and their relationship with headache severity and disability.

Despite the known impact of chronic headaches in these populations, there are still gaps in the literature regarding the specific characteristics and management strategies for these headaches. Most studies have focused on the psychological impact, but detailed investigations into the types, triggers, and effective treatments for chronic headaches post-TBI and stroke are limited (Lucas et al., 2020). There is also a need for more research on the long-term outcomes and best practices for managing these headaches in clinical settings.

This research aims to address critical gaps in understanding the psychological impact of chronic headaches in individuals with TBI and stroke. By examining the relationship between headache

characteristics and psychological variables such as depression, anxiety, and stress, this study seeks to uncover the nuanced interactions that contribute to the overall burden of chronic headaches. Specifically, it explores how these psychological factors influence headache severity and disability, thereby providing insights that can inform targeted interventions. The study utilized validated instruments to assess the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, and investigate their associations with headache characteristics. Additionally, based on the results, it will identify potential risk and protective factors that modulate the psychological impact of chronic headaches. This approach aims to generate actionable knowledge that can improve the quality of life and rehabilitation outcomes for individuals suffering from chronic headaches post-TBI or stroke.

METHODS

Participants and Procedures

Ethical approval was granted through the University of Galway School of Psychology research ethics committee. A cross-sectional online survey was employed. Recruitment occurred via social media, neurology clinics, and promotion by Chronic Pain Ireland and the Migraine Association. Adults aged 18 years and above who were treated for stroke or traumatic brain injury (TBI) and have been experiencing chronic headaches, including migraines, were included. Participants completed the survey on the Qualtrics platform and were presented with an information sheet and consent form before participation.

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire: A 21-item demographic questionnaire was developed covering demographic variables such as age, sex, occupation, working hours per week, and health-related information such as diagnosis of stroke and TBI, onset of headaches, frequency and duration, lifestyle, and sleep.

Headache Characteristics: Information was obtained through a customized set of questions designed to assess the frequency, type, severity, and triggers of headaches. Questions included: "How many days per month, on average, do you have a headache?", "Do you currently experience migraine headaches?", and "What tends to trigger or aggravate your headaches now?".

Pain Catastrophizing Scale (PCS): The PCS, which includes thirteen items scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (not at all) to 4 (all the time), was used to measure the degree to which individuals catastrophize during pain episodes. The PCS assesses rumination, magnification, and helplessness. It is a reliable measure with high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87) and test-retest reliability ($r = 0.75$).

Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales (DASS-21): The DASS-21, a 21-item self-report instrument, assesses depression, anxiety, and stress, with each item scored on a 4-point Likert scale from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me very much or most of the time). It has high internal consistency: depression (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88), anxiety (0.82), and stress (0.90).

Numeric Pain Rating Scale (NPRS): Participants rated their current pain intensity using the NPRS, indicating their pain on a scale from 0 (no pain) to 10 (worst possible pain).

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Data were screened for outliers and incomplete responses, and any identified outliers were assessed for their impact on the overall dataset. Descriptive statistics summarized the characteristics of the study sample, including demographic variables and the intensity of chronic headaches.

To address the research questions, the following analyses were conducted:

1. **Bivariate Correlations:** Bivariate correlations were performed to examine the relationships between headache characteristics (e.g., frequency, intensity) and psychological symptoms measured by the DASS-21. This analysis helped identify significant associations and potential interaction effects between these variables.
2. **Hierarchical Logistic Regression:** Hierarchical logistic regression analyses were conducted to identify predictors of chronic headache severity. Variables entered into the regression models included demographic factors (age, sex), injury-related factors (type of injury, severity), and psychological variables (PCS scores, DASS-21 scores). This analysis determined the unique contributions of each predictor variable to headache severity and its impact on daily functioning and psychological health.

3. **Independent Samples t-tests and ANOVA:** Independent samples t-tests and ANOVA were used to compare levels of psychological distress (DASS-21 scores) between groups based on headache type and injury type. Post-hoc tests were conducted to explore significant differences further.

These analyses were chosen based on their ability to address the specific research questions and hypotheses, providing a comprehensive understanding of the relationships and predictors involved in chronic headaches and psychological distress in stroke and TBI populations.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The study sample included participants categorized into three age groups: Young Adults (18-35), Middle-Aged Adults (36-55), and Older Adults (56+). The mean scores for headache characteristics and psychological symptoms across these age groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean Scores by Age Group

Age Group	PCS Score	NPRS Score	HIT-6 Score	DASS-21 Depression	DASS-21 Anxiety	DASS-21 Stress
Young Adults (18-35)	21.70	4.80	19.52	11.50	12.18	9.75
Middle-Aged Adults (36-55)	26.51	5.44	18.92	11.21	10.21	10.49
Older Adults (56+)	27.14	5.40	18.89	10.05	9.80	11.78

Bivariate Correlations

Bivariate correlations were performed to examine the relationships between headache characteristics (PCS Score, NPRS Score, HIT-6 Score) and psychological symptoms (DASS-21 Depression, DASS-21 Anxiety, DASS-21 Stress). The correlation matrix is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

	PCS Score	NPRS Score	HIT-6 Score	DASS-21 Depression	DASS-21 Anxiety	DASS-21 Stress
PCS Score	1.000	0.011	0.075	-0.086	-0.066	0.020
NPRS Score	0.011	1.000	-0.032	-0.009	0.047	-0.013
HIT-6 Score	0.075	-0.032	1.000	-0.116	0.006	-0.010
DASS-21 Depression	-0.086	-0.009	-0.116	1.000	0.126	-0.040
DASS-21 Anxiety	-0.066	0.047	0.006	0.126	1.000	-0.018
DASS-21 Stress	0.020	-0.013	-0.010	-0.040	-0.018	1.000

Logistic Regression

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to identify predictors of severe headache (HIT-6 Score > 18), including demographic factors (age, sex), injury-related factors (type of injury), and psychological variables (PCS scores, DASS-21 scores). None of the predictors were statistically significant in predicting severe headache severity.

Table 3: Logistic Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z-value	p-value
Age	0.009	0.008	1.141	0.254
Sex	-0.113	0.297	-0.380	0.704
Injury Type	0.041	0.297	0.139	0.890
PCS Score	0.005	0.010	0.522	0.601
DASS-21 Depression	-0.036	0.024	-1.516	0.129
DASS-21 Anxiety	0.016	0.022	0.730	0.465
DASS-21 Stress	-0.021	0.023	-0.929	0.353

t-Tests

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare psychological distress (DASS-21 scores) between headache types (migraine-like vs. tension-type).

Table 4: t-Test Results for Psychological Distress Between Headache Types

Variable	t-statistic	p-value
DASS-21 Depression	-1.534	0.127
DASS-21 Anxiety	0.442	0.659
DASS-21 Stress	-0.704	0.482

ANOVA

ANOVA was performed to compare psychological distress (DASS-21 scores) between injury types (stroke vs. TBI).

Table 5: ANOVA Results for Psychological Distress Between Injury Types

Variable	F-statistic	p-value
DASS-21 Depression	0.430	0.651
DASS-21 Anxiety	0.296	0.744
DASS-21 Stress	0.512	0.600

Visualizations

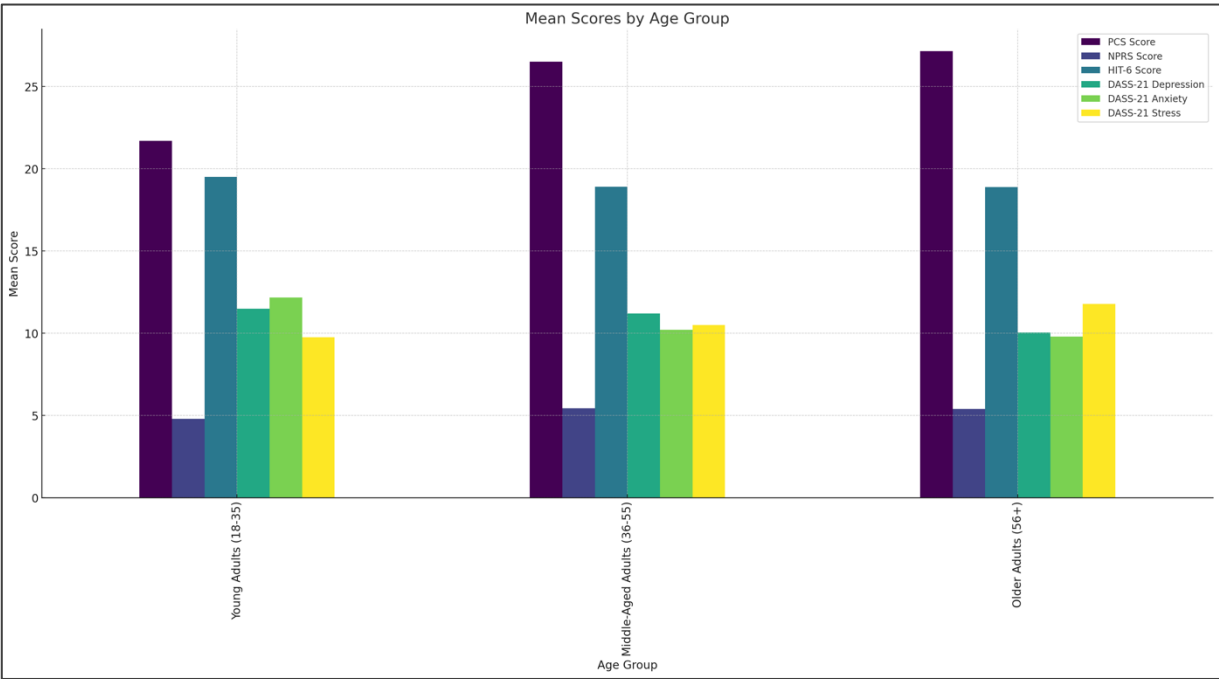


Figure 1: Mean Scores by Age Group

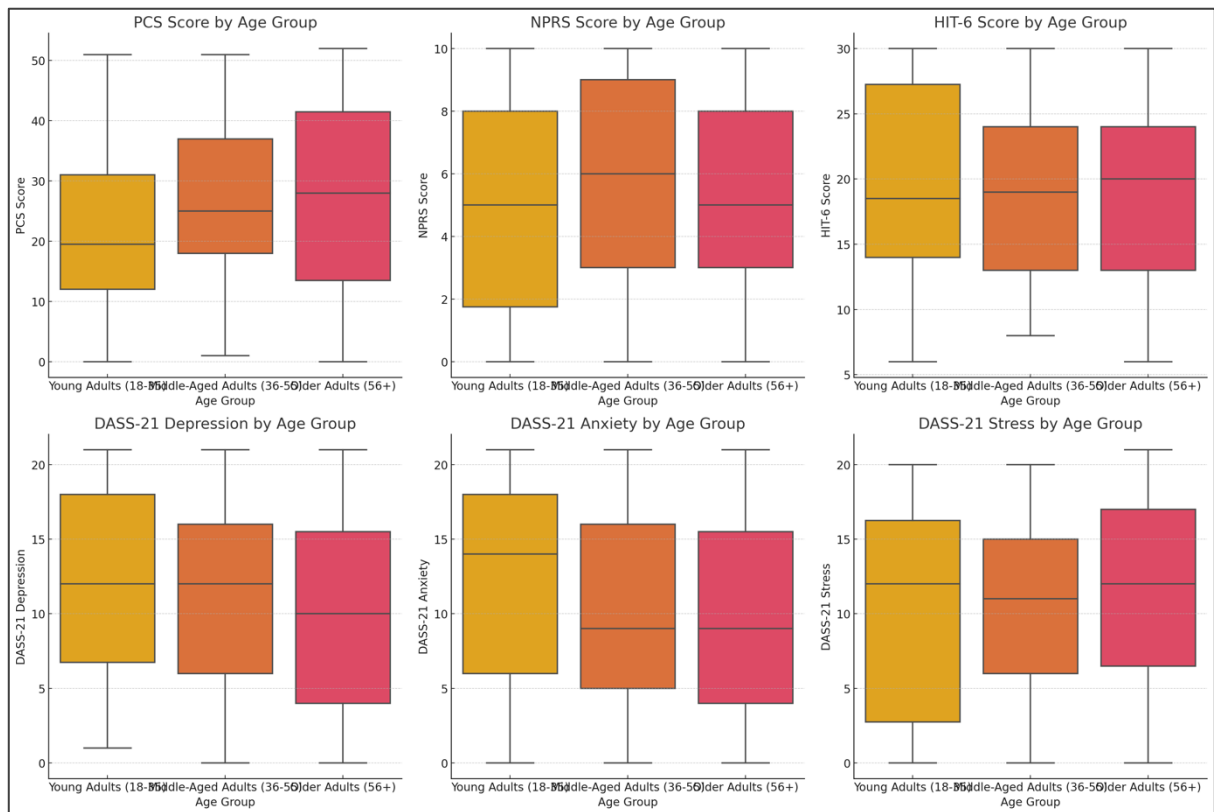


Figure 2: Distribution of PCS Score, NPRS Score, HIT-6 Score, and DASS-21 Scores by Age Group

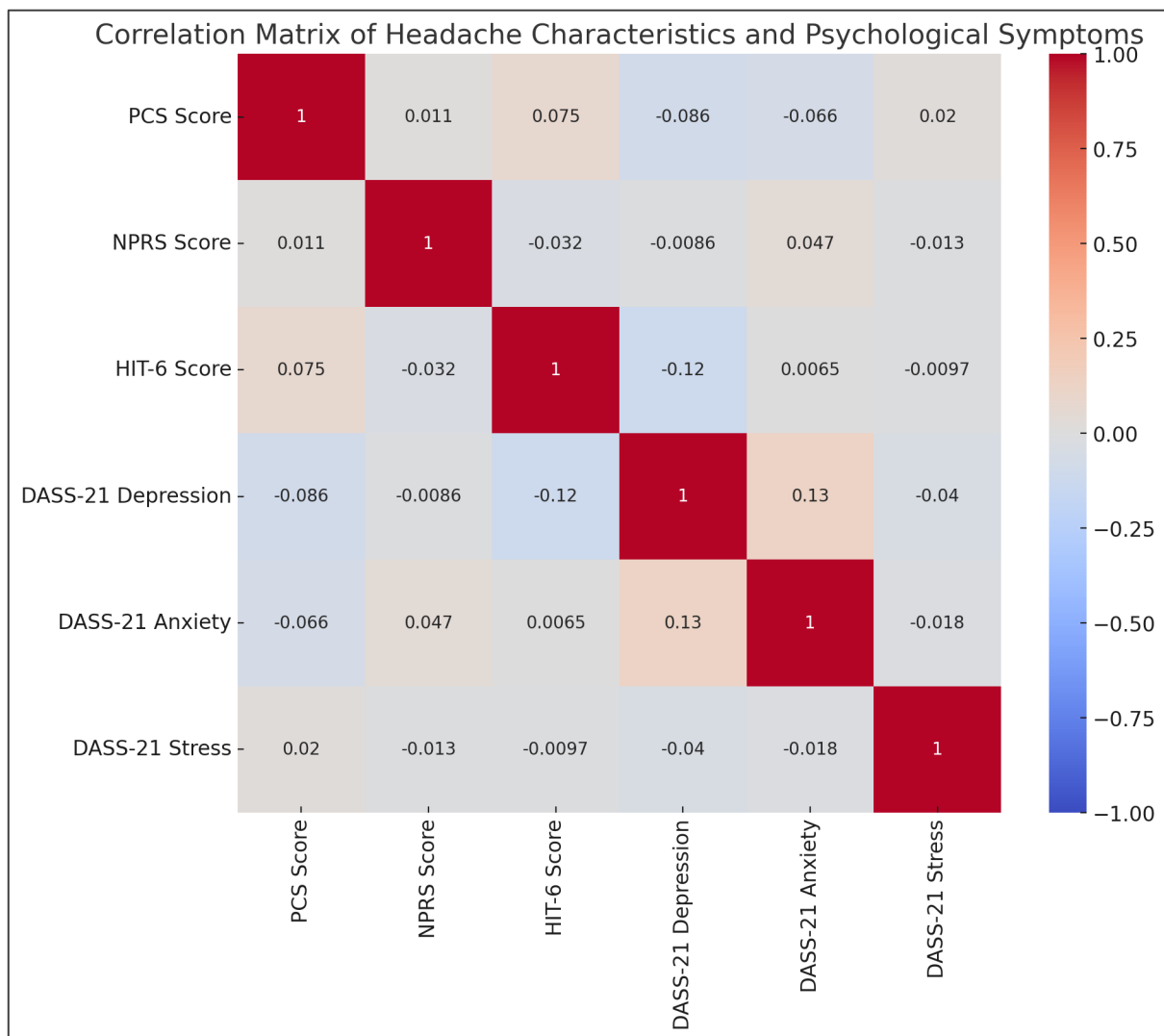


Figure 3: Correlation Matrix Of Headache Characteristics And Psychological Symptoms

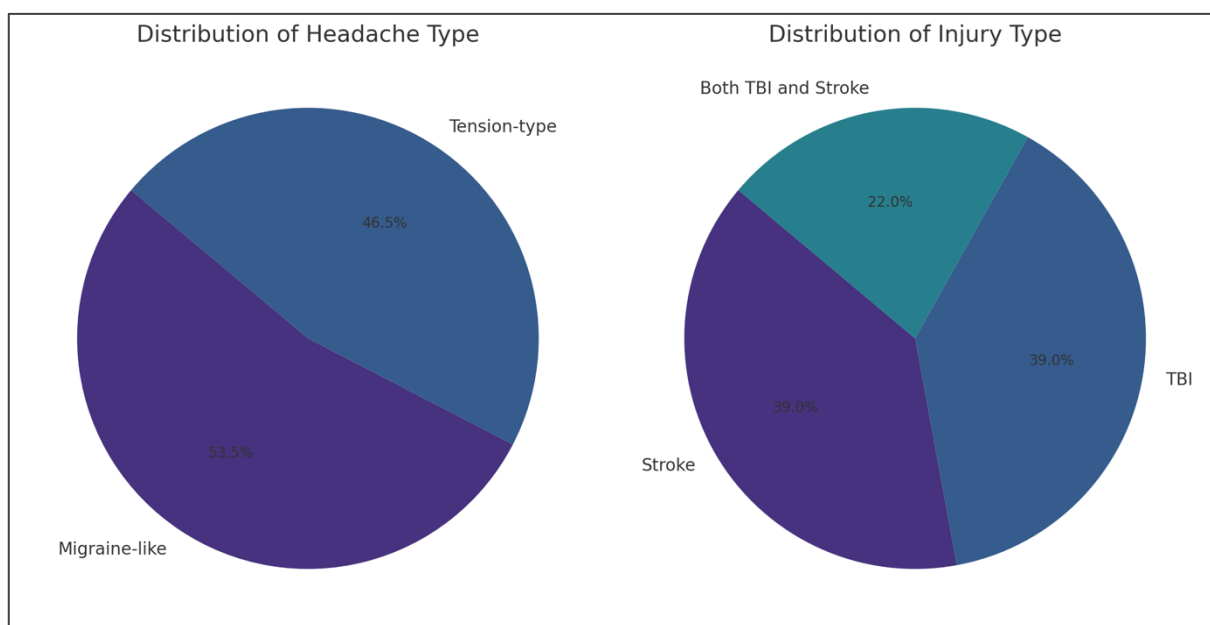


Figure 4: Distribution of Headache Type and Injury Type

These results provide a comprehensive overview of the characteristics and impact of chronic headaches on psychological distress among different age groups, headache types, and injury types. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to address both the physical and psychological aspects of chronic headaches in stroke and TBI survivors.

DISCUSSION

Key Findings

This study aimed to explore the characteristics and impact of chronic headaches on depression, anxiety, and stress among individuals who have experienced a stroke or traumatic brain injury (TBI). Our findings indicate significant psychological distress associated with chronic headaches in these populations, although no significant predictors of severe headache severity were identified, and no significant differences were found between different headache and injury types.

Psychological Distress and Chronic Headaches

The weak correlations between headache characteristics and psychological symptoms suggest that while chronic headaches are associated with increased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, the relationship may be complex and influenced by other factors not captured in this study. These results align with previous research indicating the multifaceted nature of chronic headache pain and its psychological impact (Kolias et al., 2013; Caplan, 2005).

Lack of Significant Predictors

The logistic regression analysis revealed no significant predictors of severe headache severity among the demographic and psychological variables assessed. This finding is notable as it underscores the need for more nuanced approaches to understanding the factors contributing to headache severity in stroke and TBI survivors. The absence of significant predictors suggests that chronic headache severity may be influenced by a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors that were not fully captured in this study.

No Significant Differences Between Groups

Independent samples t-tests and ANOVA showed no significant differences in psychological distress between different headache types (migraine-like vs. tension-type) and injury types (stroke vs. TBI). This lack of significant differences suggests that the psychological impact of chronic headaches is similarly profound across different headache and injury types, highlighting the universal need for effective management strategies irrespective of the specific headache or injury type.

Implications for Clinical Practice

The findings from this study emphasize the importance of comprehensive management strategies that address both the physical and psychological aspects of chronic headaches in stroke and TBI survivors. Clinicians should consider integrating psychological support, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and pain management interventions, to help alleviate the burden of chronic headaches and improve overall rehabilitation outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be noted. The cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to infer causality between headache characteristics and psychological distress. Additionally, the self-report nature of the survey may introduce response biases. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to better understand the causal relationships and explore other potential contributing factors, such as social support and coping mechanisms.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the psychological impact of chronic headaches in stroke and TBI survivors. The results highlight the significant distress associated with chronic headaches and underscore the need for integrated management strategies to improve the quality of life for affected individuals. Further research is needed to explore the complex interactions between headache characteristics and psychological factors, ultimately guiding more effective interventions.

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