

PRESS RELEASE

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Many More Americans Found To Be Living with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Charlotte, North Carolina—June 8, 2007. The most detailed scientific study to date of the prevalence of chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) found that six to ten times more people have this illness than previously believed. The study, published today in *Population Health Metrics* (<http://www.pophealthmetrics.com/content/5/1/5>), was conducted by scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It provides evidence that CFS is a significant public health problem that affects millions of people in the United States.

Researchers surveyed more than 19,000 residents in Georgia and discovered that 2.54% of the people aged 18-59 met the clinical diagnosis for chronic fatigue syndrome. This is ten times higher than the rate researchers found in the 1990s when they surveyed residents of Wichita, Kansas, and six times higher than the rate found in Chicago, Illinois. In addition to telephone screening interviews, the study design included a detailed telephone interview and a one-day clinical examination for a subset of participants.

According to Dr. William Reeves, the lead investigator on the CDC study, the higher prevalence number doesn't mean that more Americans are getting chronic fatigue syndrome, it means that researchers are getting better at counting them. "We don't think the number of Americans with CFS is dramatically increasing. What is increasing is our knowledge base about the illness. We know so much more about this illness than we did 10 or 15 years ago. This increased knowledge has led to better diagnostic and measurement tools for estimating the number of people who have CFS."

This is the first study ever to screen defined metropolitan, urban and rural populations for chronic fatigue syndrome. Reeves and his research team found no differences in the prevalence of CFS based on the size of the community. While similar studies of CFS and other illnesses have been used to provide estimates of prevalence on a national level, Reeves says, "We cannot rule out the possibility that CFS prevalence is higher in Georgia than other geographic areas."

"One of the most important findings of this study is that about half, 48%, of people who have the symptoms of chronic fatigue syndrome actually have another undiagnosed medical condition," says Dr. Nancy Klimas, an internationally known CFS researcher and clinician based at the University of Miami. Those conditions included previously undiagnosed thyroid disease, anemia, diabetes, heart disease and psychiatric illness.

Klimas believes this is vital information for both the public and physicians. "This makes it even more critical for people who have symptoms of CFS to be evaluated by a clinician. Although treatment can be challenging for CFS, it can be treated—and so can most of the other conditions that were found in study participants when they came in for a clinical evaluation. But patients can't get appropriate treatment until their illness is correctly identified."

"Only a few years ago, chronic fatigue syndrome was viewed as a rare condition. This study is important because it reports that chronic fatigue syndrome may be more common than previously estimated," says Anthony Komaroff, MD, a Harvard Medical School professor of medicine and a leading CFS expert.

Komaroff says this study adds to the growing research showing that CFS is neither rare nor an imaginary illness: "Since this condition is defined only by symptoms, some doctors have understandably asked whether there are any objective, measurable biological abnormalities. Recent research from researchers around the world demonstrates

multiple abnormalities of the brain and autonomic nervous system, a state of chronic immune system activation, a strong hereditary component, characteristic gene and gene expression patterns, and various abnormalities of energy metabolism in people with CFS. In other words, there is really no support for the view once held by some that chronic fatigue syndrome is a rare condition that may not even be a 'real' illness."

The study has other important implications, according to Kimberly McCleary, president and CEO of the CFIDS Association of America. "Earlier studies showed that less than 20% of Americans with chronic fatigue syndrome have been diagnosed, and that delays in diagnosis and treatment may lead to lower rates of recovery and a more complicated course of illness. This study underscores the need for the 80% who are suffering, but who don't know what's wrong, to receive appropriate diagnosis and care."

McCleary continues, "The study is also a call to action to increase research funding to enable scientists to determine the cause or causes of CFS and to identify more effective treatment options to help patients manage this debilitating, and often disabling, condition."

CFS is characterized by at least six months of profound, incapacitating fatigue and postexertional malaise—a worsening of symptoms following physical or mental activity. Other defining symptoms include impaired memory or concentration, sleep problems, muscle pain, joint pain, headaches, sore throat and tender lymph nodes.

The CDC investigators confirmed earlier findings that CFS is more common in women than in men, although significant numbers of men do have the illness. The journal article included no data on the prevalence rate among children, but earlier studies have confirmed that children, especially adolescents, can get CFS. Contrary to early misconceptions, CFS strikes people of all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

The CFIDS Association is the country's largest nonprofit organization providing information and support for CFS patients and health care professionals. The organization is working with the CDC on its national public health campaign for chronic fatigue syndrome, which was launched in 2006. This campaign provides information and downloadable materials for patients, their families and health care professionals.

This information can be found at <http://www.cfids.org/cfs> and <http://www.cdc.gov/cfs>.