

Chronic migraines take big toll on families, survey finds

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Debilitating headaches meant less participation in family activities, canceled plans each month.

(HealthDay)—When one family member has chronic migraine, the family as a whole can suffer, too, a new study finds.

Between 3 million and 7 million Americans suffer chronic migraines—defined as having the debilitating headaches 15 or more days a month, the researchers said.

The goal of the study was to analyze the effect of chronic migraines on family life "and enhance the understanding of the extent [to which] family responsibilities are impacted by this disorder," said study author Dawn Buse, director of behavioral medicine at the Montefiore Headache Center in New York City.

A migraine is characterized by symptoms such as intense throbbing on one side of the head, visual disturbances, nausea, dizziness, vomiting, and an intense sensitivity to light, noise, smell and sound. According to the Migraine Research Foundation, 113 million workdays are lost annually due to migraines, costing employers \$13 billion every year.

But this study, to be presented April 22 at the American Academy of Neurology annual meeting in Washington, D.C., looked at how chronic migraines might affect the families of sufferers. Research presented at meetings should be viewed as preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed medical journal.

The web-based survey involved more than 11,000 adults, of whom more than 990 suffered chronic migraines.

In addition to asking people with migraine how it affects their [family life](#), "we also gathered responses from family members themselves," Buse said. "No other previous studies have interviewed family members of people with chronic migraine."

The researchers looked at a wide range of measures, from missed activities and interactions with partners/children to impact on marital and parent-child relations and overall burden and well-being. In the end, more than 72 percent of chronic migraine sufferers said they would be better partners without migraines, while almost 60 percent said they would be better parents without the debilitating headaches.

Dr. Vincent Martin, co-director of the Headache and Facial Pain Program at University of Cincinnati Neuroscience Institute, said, "These results are similar to those published in 1998 suggesting that 60 percent of patients with migraine believe their families are significantly affected by their migraines."

Martin said what surprised him most about the study was the "enormous" effect [chronic migraines](#) had on the family. This included seven fewer days a month of participation in family activities, more than six days a month of less enjoyment with partners, and just over four days a month of canceled plans.

However, Dr. Audrey Halpern, a neurologist at the Manhattan Center for Headache and Neurology, wasn't surprised by the results.

"It's what we suspected, and provides evidence [chronic migraine] has significant impact on patients and families—and society in general," she said.

She added that the findings may help some physicians alter the way they treat migraine patients.

Chronic migraine "is very difficult to improve if you're not addressing all the issues—eating right, exercise, sleep, etcetera," she noted. Most patients also can't afford alternative treatments since most insurance companies won't cover those, and coping with chronic pain can be very difficult to handle.

Halpern said many migraine patients underestimate the disorder's impact and try to ignore it.

"Highlighting the burden of [family members](#) will help us to better focus on how to address those issues," she said.

Martin said: "Chronic migraine affects about 2 percent of the U.S. population, but in reality, it could impact three to four times as many people by its effect on the family. This study clearly demonstrates the "ripple effect" of chronic [migraine](#) on the fabric of American society the [family](#)."

Buse is hopeful the study findings will help health care professionals provide accurate diagnoses and thorough treatment plans.

More information: Visit the [Migraine Research Foundation](#) for more on migraines.

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