

Half-million Americans suffer from chronic fatigue

By Shirley Collins
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As many as 500,000 Americans may be suffering from Chronic Fatigue syndrome, according to a study that was reported at a recent research conference of the Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome Association of America. That's 25 times the number estimated by the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control. Chronic Fatigue is a little understood disease that disturbs the immune system and patients, while Dr. Benjamin

shows symptoms that include incapacitating exhaustion, muscular weakness, joint pain and neurological problems. Both its cause and cure are unknown.

Because of the variety of symptoms that mimic other diseases like multiple sclerosis, Lyme disease, AIDS and Epstein-Barr virus, diagnosis is extremely difficult, and the number of American sufferers has never been established.

The Centers for Disease Control has estimated up to 20,000 patients, while Dr. Benjamin

Natelson, a researcher at the New Jersey Medical School, said last year that there may be 80,000.

The most recent study was designed by Leonard Jason, a psychology professor at DePaul University in Chicago. The difference in numbers, Jason said, came because other studies relied on doctor's reports, while his was community-based, relying on random calls to people in the area, many of whom may not have access to health care.

Jason's study of 1,031 was conducted over a year and a half during which canvassers called people asking if they had symptoms of illness. If people complained of symptoms like significant fatigue lasting longer than six months, swollen lymph glands, or sore throats without anything that might account for it, Jason said in a phone conversation, "Then we'd evaluate them in and medically bring them in and medically evaluate them."

Evaluations, including laboratory tests, were conducted by a psychiatrist as well as by a medical doctor, Dr. Andy Phillips, director of the CFS Center in Chicago.

Jason's study translates to 200 cases of CFIDS per 100,000, by contrast with the

CDC's estimate of 2 to 7 per 10,000. Jason said, however, that 1,000 subjects is not enough to form firm conclusions and that a wider study needs to be done. He is now preparing a study of 26,000 people.

Jason said his study is currently going through peer review for journal publication.

Contacts with three other researchers in the field ran the gamut of possible reactions. Dr.

Anthony Komaroff of Brigham and Woman's Hospital in Boston declined even to speak to a reporter, relaying through a spokesman his statement that he could not comment without viewing the study in detail.

Lea Steele, an epidemiologist at the CDC, said, "We wouldn't ever make a generalization like that."

"Not only is it a small sample," she said, "but Chicago is not representative of the rest of the country."

Natelson, on the other hand, said the numbers have changed since last year. He said he now has a grant to study CFS symptoms among Gulf War veterans. Among that group, he has

found the affliction so widespread that he called it a virtual epidemic. He said Jason's estimate sounds "not unreasonable."