



Headache Wellness Center

1414 Yanceyville Street, Greensboro, NC 27405 *336.574.8000 * 336.574.8008 (Fax)
www.headachewellnesscenter.com

Chronic migraine is a subtype of migraine headache. Chronic migraine affects approximately 2% of individuals in the United States. It is more difficult to treat and manage than episodic migraine. Chronic migraine imposes a significant burden on both the individual and society.

Chronic migraine is underdiagnosed. Data from the American Migraine Prevalence and Prevention (AMPP) study (Neurology 2008;71:559) showed that only 20% of chronic migraineurs obtain an accurate diagnosis. While neurologists (and headache medicine physicians specifically) are recognized as the experts for migraine, the AMPP study showed that individuals with chronic migraine had sought evaluation from numerous other types of providers, including chiropractors, allergists, dentists, psychologists, and physical therapists. While some of these providers may be able to assist in some aspects of disability related to chronic migraine, they are unsuitable for most in comprehensively diagnosing and treating the disease. This may account in part for the low rate of diagnosis of chronic migraine in these patients and the frequent diagnosis of conditions such as "sinus headaches," "tension headaches," "and stress headaches."

Chronic migraine is undertreated. Likely related to the breadth of provider type as well as other reasons, most patients with chronic migraine do not obtain migraine-specific treatment. In the AMPP study fewer than one-third of patients obtained migraine-specific medications, whether for acute treatment or for disease prevention. Undesirable prescription non-migraine acute pain medications were used frequently, including opioids in 29% and butalbital (e.g. Fioricet and Fiorinal) in 15%.

The impact of chronic migraine on individuals is significantly greater compared to those with episodic migraine. Assessing patient disability using the Migraine Disability Assessment (MIDAS) questionnaire revealed that approximately 8% of those with chronic migraine missed at least 5 days of work or school over a three-month period of time; more than 50% missed at least 5 days of household work over the same period.

It is estimated that migraine disorders costs society \$16 billion dollars per year in lost wages, worker productivity, and expenses related to medications, doctor visits, and emergency room visits.

Most simply, chronic migraine is a disorder characterized by more headache days than not. The headaches typically last at least four hours in duration when not treated with medication. The high headache frequency is present for at least three months. Many of the headaches should have migraine elements when untreated, such as one-sided throbbing pain, with nausea or vomiting, and associated with sensitivities to lights, sounds, or movements.

Ideally an individual will track their headache days accurately using a headache calendar. For those new patients who are uncertain of their exact headache frequency, I will ask how many completely pain-free days they experience, since this is often an easier number to remember. In my experience most patients underestimate their headache numbers, but pain-free days are more accurately recalled. A correct diagnosis of chronic migraine does not require that every headache is severe or disabling; the core feature is high frequency headaches.