

# Health Reports, March 2017

Released at 8:30 a.m. Eastern time in *The Daily*, Wednesday, March 15, 2017

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## Medically unexplained physical symptoms among adults in Canada: Comorbidity, health care use and employment

Medically unexplained physical symptoms (MUPS) are conditions such as chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia and multiple chemical sensitivity that are not easily explained by physical and laboratory assessments. A diagnosis tends to be given only when other conditions with similar symptoms have been ruled out.

According to a new study, in 2014, 5.5% of Canadians aged 25 or older—an estimated 1.3 million people—had chronic fatigue syndrome (1.6%), fibromyalgia (2.0%) and/or multiple chemical sensitivity (2.7%). Women were more than twice as likely as men to report each disorder.

At 3%, the overall prevalence of any MUPS was lower among 25- to 44-year-olds than among older age groups: 7% at ages 45 to 59; 8% at ages 60 to 74; and 7% at age 75 or older.

Just over half (51%) of adults with MUPS had at least three other chronic conditions, compared with 13% of those who did not have MUPS.

As well, 35% of those with MUPS reported mood or anxiety disorders, compared with 10% without MUPS. Other research suggests that mental health problems can be related to the stress of having unexplained symptoms.

In 2014, 16% of people with MUPS reported at least 10 consultations with a family doctor or general practitioner in the past year, compared with 5% of people without MUPS. In addition, 53% of people with MUPS consulted specialists, compared with 32% of those without MUPS. Just over a quarter (26%) of people with MUPS used mental health services, versus 12% of those without MUPS. Higher health care use may be attributable in part to the fact that MUPS patients may be referred to practitioners in various domains.

A relatively large percentage of people with MUPS did not have a job or were permanently unable to work. An estimated 40% of those with MUPS were not employed in 2014, compared with 26% of those without MUPS. Among people with MUPS who were employed, 18% reported a work absence due to a chronic condition during the previous three months, compared with 5% of workers without MUPS.

### Note to readers

*This study provides estimates of the prevalence of medically unexplained physical symptoms (MUPS) in the household population aged 25 or older. The data are from the 2014 Canadian Community Health Survey and the 2012 Canadian Community Health Survey—Mental Health.*

*Respondents were asked if a health professional had diagnosed them with a condition that had lasted, or was expected to last, at least six months. The interviewer read a list of conditions that included chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia and multiple chemical sensitivity. Respondents who indicated they had at least one of the three were classified as having MUPS.*

*Extreme tiredness is the most salient symptom of **chronic fatigue syndrome**. The diagnostic criterion for **fibromyalgia** is pain lasting three months or more in at least 11 of 18 specified areas. People with **multiple chemical sensitivity** develop a variety of symptoms when they are exposed to synthetic chemicals, such as changes in heart rate, difficulty breathing, rashes, nausea, headache and confusion.*



"Medically unexplained physical symptoms among adults in Canada: Comorbidity, health care use and employment" is now available in the March 2017 online issue of *Health Reports*, Vol. 28, no. 3 (82-003-X).

This issue of *Health Reports* also contains the article, "Exposure to fine particulate matter air pollution in Canada."

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For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; [STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca](mailto:STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca)).

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