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More Than Half of Americans Live with Neurological Conditions

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | January 27, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Over half of Americans now live with neurological disorders, which significantly impact disability levels and quality of life. Tension headaches, migraines, stroke, and Alzheimer's are major contributors
- Neurological burden varies by region, with Southern states experiencing worse outcomes. Despite medical advances, mortality has decreased but long-term disability has increased due to longer lifespans
- Global brain-related disorders cost $1.7 trillion annually, with stroke and dementia the most expensive. High-income countries spend disproportionately more while lower-income nations face severe resource shortages
- Aging populations and rising care costs strain health systems, as inpatient and long-term care dominate expenses. Uneven access means outcomes depend heavily on geography, income, and health care infrastructure
- Improving neurological health requires targeting mitochondrial dysfunction through lowered linoleic acid intake, gradual gut repair, reducing electromagnetic field and plastic exposure

Your nervous system and cardiovascular system are tightly linked foundations for proper function. They work together to create a working system that ensures environmental stimuli is processed in your brain while your heart pumps the required

amount of blood to keep up with demand. That's why when one pillar begins to crack, the other soon follows.

For example, when stroke occurs — a condition wherein blood supply is suddenly blocked — brain function is immediately affected. You'll suddenly have a hard time understanding words, or language simply doesn't register at all.[1] Now, for some reason, conditions like these, as well as migraine, and Alzheimer's disease are becoming more common.

While it may sound just like a string of unrelated coincidences, newly published research has confirmed the truth — more Americans are getting sicker, neurologically speaking, as time passes. In fact, findings show that more than half of the population has at least one disorder falling under this category.

Neurological Disorders Now Affect Over Half of Americans

A new systematic analysis, conducted by researchers with the American Academy of Neurology and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, found that 54.2% of Americans — around 180.3 million people — live with at least one neurological disorder. Published in JAMA Neurology, the researchers used data from the Global Burden of Disease 2021 project to measure how these disorders contribute to overall disability and early death across the country.[2]

- **Americans are diagnosed with a wide range of neurological disorders —** A total of 36 conditions that cause neurological damage were included in the study, which included tension-type headaches, stroke, Alzheimer's disease, and diabetic neuropathy.

  The study reported that these conditions collectively account for 16.6 million disability-adjusted life years (DALYs), a measure showing years lost to disability and early death. Putting it into context, neurological disorders are now one of the top causes of disability in the United States.[3]

- **A breakdown of the most common conditions —** Tension-type headaches affected roughly 121.9 million Americans, while migraines impacted 57.7 million. Though these may sound like minor inconveniences, frequent episodes will disrupt concentration, sleep, and even digestion, reducing productivity and quality of life.

  Diabetic neuropathy (nerve damage from high blood sugar) was also prevalent, affecting 17.1 million people. Stroke and Alzheimer's disease, affecting 3.9 and 3.3 million respectively, topped the list for overall disability and premature death.

- **Geographical inequality of neurological conditions —** Southern states, including Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana, showed the highest DALY rates, while Northeastern states such as New York, Massachusetts, and New Jersey fared better. The researchers believe that this likely stems from differences in diet, access to medical care, toxin exposure, and socioeconomic conditions.

- **Despite medical advances, progress has been mixed —** The study looked back over three decades, comparing today's data to that from 1990. The overall prevalence of neurological conditions barely changed — down just 0.2% — but deaths dropped 14.6% while years lived with disability increased by 9.8%.

  This means more people are surviving but living longer with disease-related complications. While mortality from stroke has decreased thanks to better emergency care and other treatments, the number of people living with post-stroke disability continues to climb. In addition, conditions like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease have risen sharply with an aging population **because of widespread exposure to industrial toxins** that harm the mitochondria.

- **The numbers also highlight the increasing disability accumulation —** Because modern medicine has extended life expectancy, chronic neurological disorders now account for more years of suffering per person. "The burden of lost health is accentuated by reductions in mortality for disorders across the age spectrum, where more life-years equate to greater accumulated disability," the researchers emphasized.[4]

In other words, people are living longer, but not necessarily better. This shift has enormous implications for health care systems that struggle to manage neurological impairment, as they will need to come up with better programs.

- **Prevalence is higher compared to other nations —** In addition to more than half of the American population being diagnosed with a neurological disorder, the researchers noted that the prevalence rate "is the highest in the world." This means that other nations around the world tend to have lower rates of neurological disorders in their populations.

- **Suggestions for improvement —** The featured study largely focused on the rates, leaving future analyses to formulate new plans on helping Americans manage neurological disorders. Nonetheless, the researchers still gave some recommendations that can serve as a springboard for change:[5]

  > *"National health priorities should encourage robust funding for bench research to better understand causes for these disorders, translational studies to take work from the bench to the bedside, clinical trials in preparation for effective treatments, and postapproval investigations of comparative effectiveness, dissemination, and implementation.*
  >
  > *Streamlining drug approval processes, incentivizing evidence-based care, and improving access to neurological specialists and disability care could yield vast dividends in US national health in the next 30 years."*

The Economic Impact of Neurological Disorders in America and Around the World

Looking outward, a study published in The Lancet Public Health highlighted that the global financial toll of brain-related disorders, which include both neurological and mental health conditions, has reached staggering levels. The team pulled data from 204 countries between 2000 and 2019 to quantify how much the world spends on 24 brain disorders.[6]

The study focused on 24 specific brain disorders, including both neurological diseases like stroke, Alzheimer's, and Parkinson's, and mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia. Unlike the previous study, this one didn't measure indirect losses like lost productivity — it only counted the direct spending on hospitals, pharmaceuticals, nursing facilities, and home care, giving you an idea of the economic strain that nations experience around the world.

- **Economic costs are staggering —** The results showed that direct health care spending for brain disorders totaled $1.7 trillion in 2019 — nearly double what was spent two decades earlier. Moreover, the global spending rate grew 3.5% per year, underscoring that these disorders are not only medical concerns but also profound economic threats.

- **The economic burden of neurological disorders —** The data showed that neurological disorders made up 51.8% of global brain health spending, around $894 billion. Meanwhile, mental health accounted for the other 48.2%, roughly $830.3 billion.

  Stroke was the single most expensive condition, costing more than $330 billion in 2019, followed by Alzheimer's disease and other dementias at $205 billion. These two conditions alone consumed over 30% of all global spending on brain health. Depressive and anxiety disorders together accounted for another 20%, reflecting the growing global burden of mental illness.

- **Seniors are affected the most —** The study found that the heaviest spending occurred in older adults between ages 50 and 74, the same group now experiencing the fastest rise in chronic disease. This matters because brain disorders in this age range often overlap with other metabolic issues, which make treatment more expensive.

  As populations age worldwide, this combination of neurological and metabolic dysfunction threatens to bankrupt public health systems unless preventative measures are widely adopted.

- **How spending is unevenly distributed around the world —** High-income countries, which represent less than 20% of global brain-related DALYs, were responsible for 78% of total spending. In contrast, lower- and middle-income countries carried more than half the disease burden but spent only 2.7% of the total.

  This means health care systems in wealthier countries are pouring enormous sums into maintaining aging populations, while poorer nations are left with minimal resources to treat the same disorders. Thus, access to proper treatment is determined as much by geography and income as by medical need.

- **Different types of care also drove costs in unique ways —** Inpatient care represented the largest share of spending, accounting for 41.6% of all brain health costs. Ambulatory care, which includes outpatient visits and therapy sessions, followed, with mental health conditions like anxiety and depression consuming the highest share of these expenditures.

  For neurological disorders, the data showed that conditions like encephalitis and stroke demanded extensive hospital-based resources, leading to prolonged stays and high medication costs. The takeaway here? Preventing the progression of chronic neurological conditions through lifestyle, diet, and early intervention is not only better for overall health — it's far less expensive than late-stage hospital care.

- **Differences by age group —** Young adults, aged 20 to 34, accounted for the highest spending on drug use disorders, particularly opioid abuse, while middle-aged adults (35 to 49) saw the highest spending on depressive disorders. Older adults, particularly those over 75, required the most expensive long-term care, largely due to dementia and Parkinson's disease.

- **Those affected also cannot afford proper health care —** The researchers also highlighted the impact of rising health care prices rather than higher disease rates as the main driver of spending growth. In other words, health care system inefficiency, pharmaceutical pricing, and hospital over-dependence — not just illness itself — are fueling the financial strain.

Make Addressing Cellular Energy Production the Core of Your Management

Understanding the biological side helps explain why these diseases are increasing. Many neurological disorders share a common thread — mitochondrial dysfunction caused by poor diet and exposure to environmental toxins. When these energy producers inside your cells fail, your health also begins to stumble.

Since your cellular health can be affected by many factors, it makes sense to apply a multifaceted approach to repair it. Here's an overview of my recommendations, which I also explain in detail in my book "Your Guide to Cellular Health: Unlocking the Science of Longevity and Joy."

- **Minimize linoleic acid (LA) intake —** I believe that excess LA intake is one of the biggest issues affecting mitochondrial function, which is at the core of many diseases, including neurological conditions such as stroke. **As I noted in a previous article**, LA eventually damages your blood vessels, which increases inflammation and clotting risk.

  LA is commonly found in vegetable oils, which families typically use to cook their food at home. They're also used by restaurants and fast food joints, so it would be wise to reduce your frequency of dining out. Examples include sunflower, soybean, canola, and corn oil.

  Minimizing your LA intake is a big part of improving your cellular health. I recommend keeping your intake to less than 2 grams per day from all food sources, including meat. The Mercola Health Coach app, which will be available soon, contains the Seed Oil Sleuth. This feature will help you track your LA intake down to a tenth of a gram.

- **Repair your gut health —** Complex carbohydrates are good for nurturing the gut microbiome, whereas simple sugars are commonly associated with accelerated aging. Still, it isn't wise to jump straight into foods containing complex

carbohydrates if your gut is already compromised due to an unhealthy diet filled with ultraprocessed ingredients.

Research shows that complex carbohydrates feed the beneficial microbes in your large intestine.[7] But if your gut ecosystem is unbalanced, these same carbohydrates can also feed harmful bacteria. Exposure to metabolic disruptors, including excess LA and **xenoestrogens**, makes this imbalance more likely by reducing mitochondrial energy production. When energy output drops, oxygen seeps into the large intestine, creating conditions where pathogenic microbes thrive.

Aim for 250 grams of healthy carbohydrates. Start with whole fruits and white rice to give your body fuel without overfeeding the bad bacteria in your gut. From there, add root vegetables, legumes, and well-tolerated whole grains.

- **Reduce electromagnetic field (EMF) exposure —** Two simple, but highly effective, steps to cut down on everyday EMF exposure are turning off your Wi-Fi when not in use and switching to wired Ethernet connections. Be especially mindful of phone use at night. Since there's no need for constant connectivity while you sleep, power your phone off entirely and use an analog alarm clock instead.

  For additional information, I recommend you to read my article, "**EMFs Destroy Sperm Count**" which goes into greater detail about different strategies to minimize EMF exposure in your home.

- **Reduce your plastic consumption —** Like EMFs, plastics (many of which contain hormone-disrupting chemicals) are nearly unavoidable in modern life. Still, you can meaningfully reduce your exposure with these helpful strategies:

  - Opt for products sold in glass containers rather than plastic whenever possible.
  - Store your food in glass containers rather than plastic ones.
  - Look for plastic-free alternatives to commonly used products at home, such as toothbrushes and toys.

- Choose reusable products over single-use ones, such as glass bottles for your drinks, cloth grocery bags, handkerchiefs, cloth diapers and nondisposable razors.
- Invest in a home filtration system for your drinking water. In addition, bring your own refillable water bottles when going out.
- Bring your own silverware, as well as glass containers in the event you have to dine outside.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Neurological Conditions in the United States

Q: How common are neurological disorders in the United States?

A: Around 180 million Americans live with at least one neurological disorder. These conditions now represent one of the leading causes of disability nationwide.

Q: Which neurological disorders are most widespread and disabling?

A: Common conditions include tension headaches, migraines, diabetic neuropathy, stroke, and Alzheimer's disease. Tension headaches affect over 120 million Americans, while stroke and Alzheimer's contribute most to disability and early death.

Q: Why are neurological disorders increasing despite medical advances?

A: Mortality has decreased thanks to better care, but years lived with disability have increased. People are surviving longer with chronic neurological complications, driven by aging, toxin exposure, and mitochondrial dysfunction.

Q: What is the global economic impact of neurological and brain-related disorders?

A: Worldwide, brain disorders cost $1.7 trillion annually, with neurological conditions accounting for over half. Stroke and dementia are the costliest, and spending is heavily concentrated in high-income countries.

Q: What strategies are recommended to improve neurological health and reduce long-term burden?

A: Researchers urge greater funding, streamlined drug approval, and better access to neurological care. Lifestyle changes, such as minimizing LA intake, repairing gut health, lowering EMF exposure, and reducing plastic use will support cellular energy production on an individual level.

Sources and References

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