

# Chronic fatigue syndrome

Last century, epidemics of an unidentified illness swept through institutions like schools and hospitals. The symptoms included fatigue, lethargy and weakness, and victims usually recovered within two years. Today, we know these mysterious epidemics were epidemic forms of chronic fatigue syndrome.

## What is CFS?

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) can also be called ME (myalgic encephalomyelitis) and affects up to 1% of the population. We do not know what causes it. It affects women more than men, and commonly strikes in the mid twenties to mid forties. Although some people once called it 'Yuppie flu', people from all social classes can get CFS.

It can be a frustrating illness for the sufferer, who, despite prolonged and disabling symptoms, may often be told 'you are looking well'. Many patients have suffered the double indignity of being told their illness was 'all in the mind'. This is because of the vague nature of the symptoms and the absence of a test to diagnose the illness. Some people were not properly diagnosed for years.

## Some terms used in the diagnosis of CFS

### Fatigue

Tiredness and exhaustion after a level of physical exertion that was pre-

viously well tolerated. For example, patients may be confined to bed with exhaustion for days after mowing the lawn.

### Lethargy

Tiredness and a feeling of laziness and apathy. This happens all the time, not only after exercise.

Although many people feel chronically lethargic, to have a diagnosis of CFS, the patient must have had severe, debilitating fatigue for at least six months. The doctor will need to rule out other physical or psychiatric diseases that may mimic the symptoms. Also, the patient should have four of the following symptoms for a positive diagnosis.

1. Impaired memory or concentration
2. Recurrent sore throats
3. Tender lymph glands
4. Muscle pain
5. Multi-joint pain
6. A new type, pattern or severity of headaches
7. Unrefreshing sleep
8. Post-exertion malaise

If the patient does not fulfil these criteria, their problem is not CFS.

*Other features that may be present are:*

- Alcohol intolerance
- Depression and anxiety
- Dizziness
- Abnormalities of bowel function
- Light and noise sensitivity
- Sensitivities to medications, food and chemicals

## What causes CFS?

Despite much research into the area, no single infectious agent has proven to be the sole cause. Recent research suggests there are several subsets of patients with CFS and it is possible these groups may have different causes for their illnesses. This research suggests the possibility that in future, patients with CFS may be treated differently, depending on their symptoms.

## Investigations

Your doctor may order tests to exclude other diseases, however, there is no specific test to prove a person suffers from CFS.

## Treatment

Although several measures improve symptoms and help the sufferer live with the illness, no single treatment will shorten the course of the illness. Some simple measures can help reduce the severity of symptoms:

- Get enough rest and sleep
- Eat a balanced diet
- Avoid excessive physical exertion
- Avoid mental stress

Low dose antidepressant medication, which can improve sleep and energy, has some benefits, including pain relief. Likewise, a graded exercise program can improve symptoms.

Cognitive behavioural therapy, which helps the sufferer think positively and treats any coexisting

depression, can also help. This does not imply that the disease is 'all in the mind', but reflects the fact that the mind and the body are closely interrelated. Even people suffering from illnesses such as cancer have a better outcome if they undergo supportive counselling and relaxation therapy.

CFS patients have found many other complementary therapies helpful, such as nutritional approaches and naturopathic treatment. However, you are advised to avoid confusing yourself by trying many different approaches at the same time.

## Prognosis

Half of all CFS sufferers must stop work during their illness. Most recover after a period of two to five years. Some have the disease for longer periods, or recover to a level that allows them to lead a nearly normal life, with some adjustments. If you suspect you have this illness, consult your family doctor for an accurate assessment and appropriate treatment.

*You may also wish to contact one of the two local CFS support groups: Merle Fullerton on (02) 6621 5047 or John Norman on (02) 6687 8103.*