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Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Overview

What is chronic fatigue syndrome?

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) is a disease that causes you to become so fatigued (tired) you can't perform normal daily tasks. This is called chronic fatigue. The main symptom of CFS is chronic fatigue that lasts more than 6 months. Physical or mental activities often make the symptoms worse, and rest usually doesn't improve the symptoms.

Symptoms

What are the other symptoms of CFS?

People who have CFS may experience the following symptoms:

- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Sore throat
- Tender or painful areas in your neck or armpits due to swollen lymph nodes (or lymph glands)
- Muscle soreness
- Pain that moves from joint to joint without swelling or redness
- Loss of memory or concentration
- Trouble sleeping
- Extreme tiredness after exercising that lasts more than 24 hours

These and other symptoms often won't go away or keep coming back for 6 months or more.

CFS may occur after an illness (such as a cold) or it can start during or shortly after a period of high stress. It can also come on slowly without any clear starting point or any obvious cause. In some cases, CFS can last for years.

Causes & Risk Factors

What causes chronic fatigue syndrome?

No one is certain about what causes CFS. The symptoms may be caused by a weak immune system. Or they may be caused by some kind of virus. Researchers are still looking for the cause of CFS.

Diagnosis & Tests

How is chronic fatigue syndrome diagnosed?

CFS is complicated and difficult to diagnose. Some people have a hard time accepting CFS as a

disease. It's important to remember that your fatigue is real and that you can work with your doctor to improve your symptoms.

The first step is to see if there is any other explainable cause for your fatigue. Your doctor will probably want to review your symptoms and medical history, and give you a physical exam. Your doctor may also want to do some blood tests, but lab testing is not often helpful in the diagnosis of CFS.

Treatment

How can my doctor help?

Your doctor can work with you to provide symptom relief and to help you find ways of coping with the way CFS changes your life. Chronic fatigue affects you physically, emotionally and socially. When you address all of these factors, you have the best chance of adjusting to your illness and feeling more satisfied with your life.

If you have CFS, a good long-term relationship with your doctor helps. This relationship can be the key to managing CFS.

How is chronic fatigue syndrome treated?

Medicine can treat some of the symptoms, such as muscle aches, sleep problems, anxiety and depression. The medicine may only reduce your symptoms and allow you to be more active, not cure the fatigue. So far, there is no medicine that cures the entire syndrome. Most symptoms improve with time.

How can I help myself?

- Keep a daily diary to identify times when you have the most energy. Plan your activities for these times.
- Keep up some level of activity and exercise, within your abilities. Your doctor can help you plan an exercise program to maintain your strength at whatever level is possible. Exercise can help your body and mind.
- Give yourself permission to recognize and express your feelings, such as sadness, anger and frustration. You may need to grieve for the energy you have lost.
- Ask for support from family and friends. Look for support groups or counseling in your community. Your doctor is another important source of help. Emotional support is important in coping with a chronic health problem.
- If your memory and concentration are affected by chronic fatigue, keep lists and make notes to remind yourself of important things. Also, give yourself more time for activities that take concentration. Medicine may also help you sleep better, which might improve your memory and concentration.

Other Organizations

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- I'm always tired. Is there something wrong with me?
- Do I need any tests to help determine why I'm so tired all the time?
- What is the likely cause of my fatigue?
- How is chronic fatigue syndrome treated? Do I need medicine?

- Will alternative therapies such as yoga or acupuncture help?
 - Do I need to make any diet or lifestyle changes? Is it safe for me to exercise? What kind of exercise should I do?
 - How do I convince people that my fatigue is real?
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