

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Chronic fatigue syndrome

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) isn't just being tired all the time. Although its most common symptom is profound exhaustion, the name can be misleading since this illness involves a range of debilitating symptoms. Many of these are invisible, such as memory and concentration problems, poor stamina and muscle and joint pain. Symptoms can also vary from person to person. As a result, CFS is difficult to diagnose, understand or treat.

What is Chronic Fatigue Syndrome?

Since scientists didn't know the cause of this illness, it was named after its most noticeable symptom—chronic fatigue. "Syndrome" simply means a group of symptoms that occur together. What we know is that Chronic Fatigue Syndrome is a neurological disorder that causes interactions between the immune, central nervous and endocrine systems.

What Causes CFS?

Unfortunately, there is no one identifiable cause. Researchers believe that there are a number of triggers that result in the condition.

What are the Symptoms?

For many CFS begins after a bad cold, flu, bronchitis, hepatitis, or intestinal bug. In some cases, there is no preceding illness, but CFS symptoms develop gradually.

Unfortunately, CFS symptoms don’t go away. They may come and go, varying in intensity and frequency. The international criteria set for a case definition of CFS include: a debilitating fatigue lasting for at least six months, and the presence of four or more of the following symptoms:

- Headaches
- Tender lymph nodes
- Fatigue and weakness
- Muscle and joint aches
- Trouble concentrating
- Impaired memory
- Sleep difficulties—trouble sleeping or sleep that is not refreshing

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What are the Long-Term Effects?

There are many potential long-term effects, including:

- Cognitive problems such as difficulty concentrating, finding words, retaining information, and calculating numbers.
- Vision problems such as blurring, light sensitivity and eye pain.
- Physical changes such as trouble breathing; dizziness and balance problems; irregular heartbeat, chest pains; digestive and bowel problems; ringing in the ears (tinnitus); sensitivity to odours, chemicals and medications; weight changes; fainting; muscle twitching; and seizures.
- Psychological problems such as depression, irritability, anxiety, panic attacks, personality changes, mood swings.

How is CFS Diagnosed?

CFS is difficult to diagnose since many of its symptoms mimic other diseases. There is no simple diagnostic test. Diagnosis involves identifying a pattern of symptoms and ruling out diseases with similar symptoms, such as multiple sclerosis and lupus. It is therefore a time-consuming, difficult and frustrating process.

Receiving a diagnosis of CFS is a double-edged sword. The patient is generally glad to finally have their illness identified. The disease is so little understood that they have often faced an uphill struggle to convince doctors, family and friends that they are ill. On the other hand, the diagnosis is devastating, since it confirms that they have a chronic condition, for which there is no cure.

Coping with CFS

Although there is no cure, there are many treatments that help relieve its symptoms. These include:

- **Anti-inflammatory drugs.** These can include medications such as ibuprofen for joint and muscle aches and fevers.
- **Regular, gentle exercise.** Some people with CFS experience exercise intolerance.
- **Fatigue management.** Rehabilitation medicine specialists can help develop a program to improve energy levels.
- **Diet therapy.** A specialized diet can help with food intolerance and digestive problems.

- **Anti-depressants.** These have been found to be effective for patients with fibromyalgia, a disease similar to CFS.
- **Sleep management/sleeping pills.** These may help ensure adequate sleep, or some CFS sufferers go to sleep centres to have their sleeping patterns analyzed and to find solutions that help them sleep restfully.
- **Physical therapy/massage.** Gentle therapies can often help CFS patients maintain muscle tone and relieve pain.
- **Occupational therapy.** An occupational health assessment can help people find ways of using their energy more efficiently on the job.
- **Alternative health therapies.** Acupuncture, tai chi, and herbal supplements have been helpful in relieving symptoms for some people with CFS.

Is There a Chance of Recovery?

Statistics show that approximately one-third of CFS patients in the U.S. recover almost fully from CFS. Others experience small to moderate improvements or progressively worsening symptoms. It appears that people stand the best chance of recovery within the first five years of the illness.

Coping Emotionally with CFS

Coping with this life-altering chronic illness can be dispiriting. There are many challenges, including having to constantly explain the illness to disbelievers. Since symptoms, such as fatigue or confusion, come and go, the CFS patient can seem very fit one day and very disabled the next. Dealing with the sudden and unpredictable onset of symptoms can make planning difficult. Many CFS sufferers slowly cut themselves off from parts of their previously active lives.

While CFS is not a psychological disorder, like all chronic illnesses, it takes its toll on one's emotional health, often resulting in depression or anxiety. Counselling can help patients learn to deal with the psychological aspects of this illness. Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and meditation can also help CFS sufferers learn to cope with anxiety and frustration.

There are a number of support groups that offer meetings, chat rooms and information for sufferers to share their feelings and successes. If CFS is affecting you or someone close to you, seek out information and assistance.