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Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Let's face it: everyone gets tired. But what if the feeling of low energy and fatigue don't go away? Or if it's so extreme that you can hardly get up in the mornings or get through a day of work? It may be that you have **chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS)**. In this document, you'll learn some general information about what is chronic fatigue syndrome, its symptoms, diagnosis, and some treatment and therapy options to help you combat fatigue and feel better.

What is chronic fatigue syndrome?

- Chronic fatigue syndrome is a disorder that causes extreme fatigue, so that even with rest, a person still feels tired. It can be so draining that it limits your ability to perform daily tasks and activities.
- At different points in time, as well as in different regions of the world, chronic fatigue syndrome has also gone by the names ME/CFS, Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, SEID, and Systemic Exertion Intolerance Disease.
- It is most common among women in their 40s and 50s, but even children and men can have it. CFS is also experienced by many of those who have autoimmune disorders, in which a person's immune system begins to target his or her own body.
- CFS is a chronic illness, meaning it can last for many years. Some people experience times of improvement, as well as times of worsening symptoms.
- It can be caused by viral infections, immune system problems, and/or hormonal imbalances.



Symptoms

According to the U.S. National Library of Medicine, the **main symptom** of CFS is **severe fatigue** that lasts for **6 months or more**. A doctor may diagnose you with CFS if you present **four or more of these other symptoms**:

- **Feeling unwell for more than 24 hours after physical or mental activity.** This could include activities like cleaning your home, walking your dog around the block, or reading the newspaper. It's often described as a "flu-like" feel, but without the common signs of a flu, such as a fever or runny nose.
- **Muscle pain.** Sometimes the pain may feel like it never goes away; other times, it may come and go with no apparent cause or reason.
- **Memory problems.** Some people with CFS describe it as "brain fog," meaning that though you know the information, such as a person's name or an event, you have trouble recalling it or describing it.
- **Headaches.** Though these are common in people with CFS, frequent and/or severe headaches, as well as migraines with changes in your vision should never be ignored.
- **Pain in multiple joints** that may or may not include swelling or redness of the joints.
- **Sleep problems,** including trouble falling and/or staying asleep, or waking up feeling unrefreshed. Though people with CFS may nap more often, they don't always feel well rested after a nap. A sleep study may need to be performed to rule out any existing sleep disorders that could be causing the chronic fatigue.
- **Sore throat.** Sometimes a sore throat is experienced without the presence of a cold or flu.
- **Enlarged lymph nodes in your neck or armpits.** If you can palpate (feel) or see them, talk to your doctor.



Diagnosis

Unfortunately, coming to a diagnosis of chronic fatigue syndrome can be challenging. As you may have already noticed, many of the symptoms of CFS are very similar to those of other common disorders, such as migraines, the flu, arthritis, etc. Besides, fatigue is experienced by many people, from those who have autoimmune disorders, to people who are overweight, to those with heart disease. What's more, there really aren't any specific lab tests that directly point to a diagnosis of CFS. Symptoms vary from person to person, and they can come and go over time, further complicating the diagnosis.



It's no wonder that even though 1 in 4 million Americans have CFS, less than 20% have been diagnosed (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). Still, this doesn't mean a diagnosis is out of reach. If you believe you may have CFS, make an appointment with your medical care provider. He or she will likely begin with a detailed medical

history, including running through your current medications. You'll probably have a physical or mental examination performed, and may be sent to the lab to be screened for a battery of tests to rule out any other disorders. Once your doctor has a better picture of what may be going on, he or she will be able to present you with treatment options.

Treatment options

Living with chronic fatigue syndrome is not easy, but hopefully you and your medical care team will be able to find what works best for you. You may want to research more about the following options, but always make sure to talk to your doctor before trying any new supplements, or diet and exercise regimen.

- **Medications**

- **Antidepressants.** Having CFS doesn't mean you're depressed, but the two do tend to go hand-in-hand. If you do have depression, treating the depression may make it easier for you to manage the symptoms of CFS. Antidepressants are often given in low doses to help improve sleep and relieve pain, but may not work for everyone.
- **Sleeping pills.** Your doctor will likely recommend you start by incorporating healthier sleep routines and cutting back on caffeine, but if that doesn't help, prescription sleep aids may provide you with better quality sleep.

- **Common Therapy Approaches**

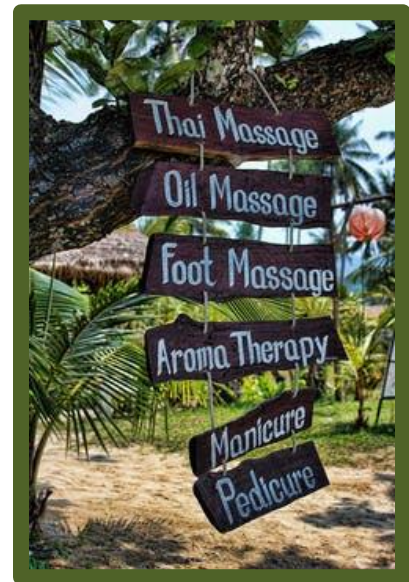
- **Take it easy.** Learn to pace yourself and know when to say "no." Don't overcommit yourself. Know that you'll have good days ... and not-so-good days. Break up your activities so that you don't get too tired trying to get it all done at once.
- **Eat healthier.** Eliminate junk-foods and highly-processed foods. Try to incorporate healthier eating habits, including eating more vegetables and drinking more water. You may want to meet with a nutritionist to discuss different meal options and ways to prepare healthier meals. Consider seeing an allergy specialist; it could be that an undiagnosed allergy is triggering or worsening some of the symptoms you are experiencing.
- **Exercise.** This could be through physical therapy you receive at a PT office or by simply incorporating regular, light exercise into your schedule, such as a 15-minute walk in between your work day. You can also try yoga or gentle stretching. If, however, you feel wiped the next day, you're doing too much and will need to work on building your strength and endurance gradually before increasing the intensity of your workout.





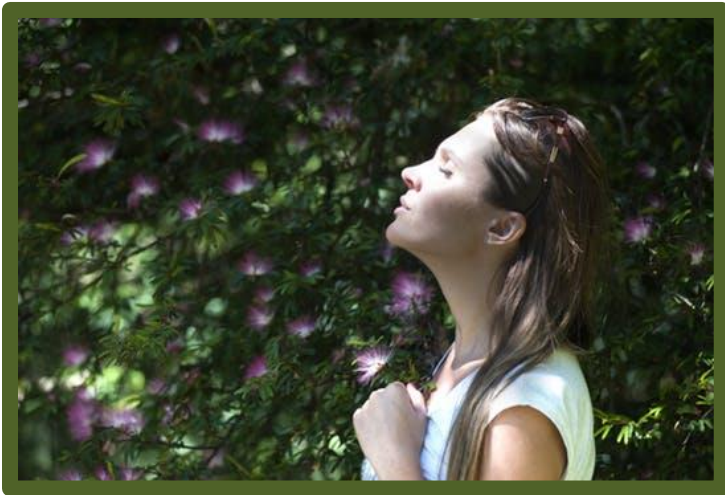
- **Sleep.** Yes, you may not have the best quality sleep now, but make the effort to give yourself the opportunity to sleep well. Try to keep a regular sleep schedule and don't drink coffee too late in the day. If you take medication for sleep, remember that improving sleep is more than just taking a sleep pill — it involves lifestyle changes, as well.

- **Reduce stress.** Sometimes, this is easier said than done. Still, it's important that you analyze what factors in your day-to-day living are causing you excess stress. You may be able to change some things, such as organizing a calendar with work deadlines or breaking up chores around the house. Other things are harder to change: you can't go from having four kids to none, or just quit your current job and automatically find a new, less-stressful, better paying job. It's going to take some brainstorming, as well as some communication with your family and employer, to find ways you can cut back on stress.



- **Psychological counseling.** Sometimes it's hard to see the big picture when your body and mind feel so overwhelmed and tired. Talking to someone may help you develop strategies you can employ to better manage the symptoms of CFS.

- **Alternative Therapies**



- Deep breathing exercises, meditation, and acupuncture are just a few alternative therapies that some people find helpful.
- Vitamins and supplements can also help, but it's important to first check with your doctor as some herbal products can interfere with prescription medication or have other side effects.
- Think about joining a support group of people who have CFS. You can bounce around ideas, therapy options, and provide one another with help and encouragement to live well with chronic fatigue syndrome.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome is a hard-to-diagnose health condition that can be challenging to manage and treat. Remember, if you are experiencing any of the common symptoms of CFS and have had them for an extended period of time, it's best that you discuss your health with a medical care provider. If, however, you are unsatisfied with your doctor's approach, consider getting a second opinion from another medical professional. Also keep in mind that not all treatments work for everyone, and you may have to try a few different things before finding what works best for you. Stay positive, be hopeful, and surround yourself by people who will support and encourage you along the way!

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