

What is chronic fatigue syndrome?

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) is a recently defined illness consisting of a complex of related symptoms. The most characteristic symptom is debilitating fatigue that persists for several months.

What are the other symptoms of CFS?

In addition to profound fatigue, some patients with CFS may complain of sore throat, slight fever, lymph node tenderness, headache, muscle and joint pain (without swelling), muscle weakness, sensitivity to light, sleep disturbances, depression, and difficulty in concentrating. Although the symptoms tend to wax and wane, the illness is generally not progressive. For most people, symptoms plateau early in the course of the illness and recur with varying degrees of severity for at least six months and sometimes for several years.

What causes CFS?

The cause of CFS is not yet known. Early evidence suggested that CFS might be associated with the body's response to an infection with certain viruses, however subsequent research has not shown an association between an infection with any known human pathogen and CFS. Other possible factors that have been suspected of playing a role in CFS include a dysfunction in the immune system, stress, genetic predisposition, and a patient's psychological state.

Is CFS contagious?

Because the cause of CFS remains unknown, it is impossible to answer this question with certainty. However, there is no convincing evidence that the illness can be transmitted from person to person. In fact, there is no indication at this time that CFS is caused by any single recognized infectious disease agent. Most people in close contact with CFS patients have not developed the illness, and there is currently no justification to isolate patients with CFS from other persons.

How is CFS diagnosed?

There is currently no definitive way to diagnose CFS. A physician will generally make the diagnosis based on the patient's symptoms, physical findings, and the exclusion of other diseases. Because fatigue is a common symptom of many other diseases, it is very important for a person with CFS-like symptoms to be thoroughly evaluated for other diseases, including illnesses resulting from medical, psychosocial, or drug-related causes. Even if no other disease is diagnosed initially, periodic re-evaluations should be done to insure that another disorder is not responsible for the illness. Many instances have been reported in which patients diagnosed with CFS have later been found to have a specific disease, such as a connective tissue disorder or a malignancy, which was probably the cause of their CFS-like symptoms all along.

How is CFS treated?

No proven effective treatment for CFS now exists. A wide range of therapies have been attempted, ranging from low doses of antidepressant drugs to antiviral and dietary therapy, but none have been proven to be effective. Before consenting to treatment with any of these unproven regimens, it is prudent to obtain a second opinion from another reputable physician. Most experts feel that management of CFS should be directed at symptomatic relief and minimizing the disruptive effect the illness can have on the patient's life. Professional counseling may help the patient cope with the feelings of stress and isolation that often accompany the disease. A regimen of balanced diet, adequate rest, and moderate physical activity may help a person to approach a more normal lifestyle within the bounds of the severity of the illness. The patient should try to identify and respect activity limitations to avoid worsening of the fatigue.