

Chronic fatigue syndrome

Signs and symptoms

Chronic fatigue syndrome is a flu-like condition that can drain your energy and, sometimes, last for years. People previously healthy and full of energy may experience a variety of signs and symptoms.

People with chronic fatigue syndrome exhibit signs and symptoms similar to those of most common viral infections. Unlike flu (influenza) symptoms, which usually subside in a few days or weeks, the signs and symptoms of CFS can last much longer. They may come and go frequently with no identifiable pattern.

Primary signs and symptoms

In addition to persistent fatigue, not caused by other known medical conditions, chronic fatigue syndrome has eight possible primary signs and symptoms. Chronic fatigue syndrome symptoms include:

- Loss of memory or concentration
- Sore throat
- Painful and mildly enlarged lymph nodes in your neck or armpits
- Unexplained muscle soreness
- Pain that moves from one joint to another without swelling or redness
- Headache of a new type, pattern or severity
- Sleep disturbance
- Extreme exhaustion lasting more than 24 hours after physical or mental exercise

According to the International Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Study Group — a group of scientists, researchers and doctors brought together by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to determine a standard method for defining and diagnosing chronic fatigue syndrome — a person meets the diagnostic criteria of chronic fatigue syndrome when unexplained persistent fatigue occurs for **six months or more** along with at least **four of the eight** primary signs and symptoms.

Additional signs and symptoms

In addition, people with chronic fatigue syndrome have reported other various signs and symptoms that aren't part of the official definition. These include:

- Abdominal pain
- Allergies or sensitivities to foods, alcohol, odors, chemicals, medications or noise
- Bloating
- Chest pain
- Chronic cough
- Diarrhea
- Dizziness, balance problems or fainting
- Dry mouth
- Earache
- Irregular heartbeat
- Jaw pain
- Morning stiffness
- Nausea

- Chills and night sweats
- Psychological problems, such as depression, irritability, anxiety disorders and panic attacks
- Shortness of breath
- Tingling sensations
- Visual disturbances, such as blurring, sensitivity to light, eye pain and dry eyes
- Weight loss or gain

Causes

Of all chronic illnesses, chronic fatigue syndrome is one of the most mysterious. Unlike definite infections, it has no clear cause. Several possible causes have been proposed, including:

- Depression
- Iron deficiency anemia
- Low blood sugar (hypoglycemia)
- History of allergies
- Virus infection, such as Epstein-Barr virus or human herpesvirus 6
- Dysfunction in the immune system
- Changes in the levels of hormones produced in the hypothalamus, pituitary glands or adrenal glands
- Mild, chronic low blood pressure (hypotension)

The cause of chronic fatigue syndrome may be an inflammation of the pathways of the nervous system as a response to an autoimmune process, but with nothing measurable in the blood as in other autoimmune diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis and lupus. Chronic fatigue syndrome may also occur when a viral illness is complicated by a dysfunctional immune system. Some people with CFS may have a low blood pressure disorder that triggers the fainting reflex.

In many cases, however, no serious underlying infection or disease is proved to specifically cause chronic fatigue syndrome. Lack of medical knowledge and understanding of CFS has made determining and describing the characteristics of the condition difficult.

Risk factors

Women are diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome two to four times as often as men, but sex isn't a proven risk factor for this condition. It may be that women are simply more likely than men are to report their symptoms to their doctor.

The condition is most common in people in their 40s and 50s, but it can affect people of all ages.

Because the cause of the condition is unknown, doctors have yet to determine and confirm definite risk factors for the disease.

Screening and diagnosis

A diagnosis of chronic fatigue syndrome is based on exclusion. This means that before arriving at a diagnosis, a doctor has ruled out any other disease or condition that may be causing your fatigue and related symptoms.

In general, doctors find it difficult to diagnose chronic fatigue syndrome because it has some of the same signs and symptoms as many other diseases. There's no diagnostic or laboratory procedure to confirm the presence of chronic fatigue syndrome.

Doctors exclude certain conditions before considering a diagnosis of chronic fatigue syndrome. These include:

- Having an active, identifiable medical condition that often results in fatigue, such as low levels of thyroid hormones (hypothyroidism) or sleep apnea
- Using medicines that may cause fatigue
- Having a relapse of a previously treated illness that can result in fatigue, such as cancer
- Having had a past or current diagnosis of a major depressive disorder or other psychiatric illness, such as schizophrenia or an eating disorder
- Abusing alcohol or another substance

- Being severely obese, as defined by a body mass index (BMI) of 45 or greater

Over time, be alert to any new cues that might indicate that the problem is caused by something other than chronic fatigue syndrome. When other diseases or conditions are excluded, your doctor may then determine if your illness meets the CFS-specific criteria.

Complications

Possible complications of chronic fatigue syndrome include:

- Depression, related both to symptoms and lack of diagnosis
- Side effects and adverse reactions related to medication treatments
- Side effects and adverse reactions associated with lack of activity (deconditioning)
- Social isolation caused by fatigue
- Lifestyle restrictions
- Missing work

Self-care

Learning how to manage fatigue can help you improve your level of functioning and your quality of life despite your symptoms. You may work with a rehabilitation medicine specialist who can teach you how to plan activities to take advantage of times when you usually feel better.

These important self-care steps can help you to maintain good general health:

- **Reduce stress.** Develop a plan to avoid or limit overexertion and emotional stress. Allow yourself time each day to relax. That may mean learning how to say no without guilt. If possible, don't change your routine totally. People who quit work or drop all activity tend to do worse than those who remain active.
- **Get enough sleep.** Getting sufficient sleep is essential. In addition to allotting enough time for sleep, practice good sleep habits, such as going to bed and getting up at the same time each day and limiting daytime napping.
- **Exercise regularly.** You may need to start slow and build up gradually. But exercising regularly often improves symptoms. Many people find exercises such as walking, swimming, biking and water aerobics to be helpful. A physical therapist may help you develop a home-exercise program. Stretching, good posture and relaxation exercises also can be helpful.
- **Pace yourself.** Keep your activity on an even level. If you do too much on your good days, you may have more bad days.
- **Maintain a healthy lifestyle.** Try to eat a balanced diet, drink plenty of fluids, limit your caffeine intake, stop smoking, get adequate rest and exercise regularly. Find a hobby or career that's enjoyable and fulfilling for you.

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Answer

Many studies have evaluated a wide variety of natural products for effectiveness against chronic fatigue syndrome. Most results have been disappointing. A few remedies — intramuscular magnesium for people with low red blood cell magnesium, a combination of fish oil and evening primrose oil, melatonin, NADH, propionyl-L-carnitine, and ribose — have shown encouraging results in preliminary studies. However, many of these promising early results failed to be confirmed by subsequent studies or the original studies were too small to be conclusive. At this time, there is insufficient evidence of benefit to recommend any specific dietary or herbal supplements as a treatment for chronic fatigue.