Chronic fatigue syndrome

Chronic fatigue syndrome is a frustrating and distressing illness that affects people of all ages. No one knows what causes it and there is no cure. But there are things you can try that may help you feel better.

What happens in chronic fatigue syndrome?

Feeling tired is very common, especially if you are under stress with work or personal problems, or if you just have a busy life. But people with chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS for short) feel exhausted and weak most of the time for no obvious reason. It stops them getting on with their normal activities and enjoying life.

CFS is sometimes called myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME for short), or CFS/ME.

CFS can last from a few months to many years, although the symptoms may come and go during that time. It can affect adults and children.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom is feeling completely exhausted most of the time, mentally as well as physically. This deep tiredness is not relieved by rest. You may also have pain in your muscles, difficulty sleeping, trouble concentrating, and mood changes.

Sometimes CFS starts after another illness, such as a bad cold that seems to linger for longer than it should. And some people find it starts during a time of stress. But it can also come on gradually for no obvious reason.

If you are worried that you or your child may have CFS, see your doctor. There's no simple test for CFS. But your doctor will ask you some questions about your general health and your life, and will check whether your fatigue may be caused by anything else.

Other conditions that can cause tiredness include:

- A long-lasting infection
- Anaemia (usually caused by a lack of iron)
Problems with your thyroid gland

• Diabetes

• Depression

• Anorexia or bulimia

• Alcohol or drug abuse

• Ongoing stress, or

• Being very overweight (obese).

Tiredness can also be caused by pregnancy or other hormonal changes, such as the menopause.

It is important for your doctor to be sure that no other problems are causing your symptoms. If your symptoms are caused by something other than CFS it's important that you get the right treatment. So you should tell your doctor about any other health problems you have, and about any other prescription and over-the-counter medicines and supplements you are taking.

What treatments work?

We don't know what causes CFS, so it's hard to know how to treat it, and there is no cure. The aim of treatment is to ease the symptoms and help people live as normal a life as possible.

Treatment without medicines

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is a form of psychotherapy or 'talking treatment'. The idea is that the therapy will help you to encourage positive thoughts and behaviours over negative ones. There is some evidence that it can help people with CFS feel less tired and more positive. CBT may also help children with CFS attend school more regularly.

When you have CBT you meet with a trained therapist for several sessions. There's no evidence that CBT causes any harmful side effects.

There's some evidence that a graded aerobic exercise programme can help some people feel less tired. Aerobic exercise is any continuous activity that makes your heart and lungs work faster. It could include walking, cycling, or swimming. For people with more severe symptoms, it could start with just getting out of bed and moving around a little each day. Graded aerobic exercise builds up gradually from a gentle beginning.
The important thing about exercise programmes is that they are tailored to each person’s needs and abilities. You should not be expected to do anything you don’t feel capable of doing. Doing too much exercise too soon is likely to make you feel worse than ever.

**Pacing** aims to find the right balance, for you, between rest and the activities of everyday life, including exercise. The idea is that if you use what limited energy you have carefully, your energy will gradually increase. Pacing involves:

- Checking your energy and activity levels so that you can adjust your activity up or down
- Dividing tasks and activities up into achievable ‘chunks’ rather than trying to do too much at one time
- Taking control of decisions about your personal energy and activity levels rather than following expert advice to the letter.

If you have CFS you probably feel worn out after very little activity and need to rest a lot. But this doesn’t mean that you should do nothing at all. In fact, most doctors don’t recommend that people take **complete rest**. It could end up making you feel even weaker. For your mental as well as your physical wellbeing, it’s important to try to keep doing something that you enjoy, even just for a short time every day.

**Treatment with medicines**

There are no medicines that can treat the fatigue caused by CFS. But some people with the condition take medicines to treat some of the symptoms.

For example, CFS causes many people with the condition to develop depression. For this reason, many people with CFS are prescribed antidepressants.

Some people are also prescribed medications to help with conditions that often occur in people with CFS, such as disturbed sleep, pain, migraine, or irritable bowel syndrome.

**What will happen to me?**

CFS can last for years. And, although it’s not medically dangerous, it can make you feel very ill and miserable, and can interfere with your family, social, and work life.

The good news is that most children recover completely. The outlook is less certain for adults. Although a lot of people do gradually feel better, most still have periods of feeling very tired. You may find it more difficult to recover if you are older, if your symptoms are severe, or if you also have a mental health problem, such as depression.

**Where to get more help**

Talking to other people with the condition, learning from their experiences, and feeling as though you are not alone, can be crucial in living with and recovering from CFS. And there are many charities and support groups that offer help.
For example, in the UK, the ME association (http://www.meassociation.org.uk/) and Action for ME (https://www.actionforme.org.uk/) offer information and local support to people with CFS. Your doctor may be able to suggest where to get help where you live. Or you can search online.