

SAMHS INFO BULLETIN



Compiled by Corporate Communication

WORLD CHRONIC FATIGUE AND IMMUNE DYSFUNCTION SYNDROME DAY 12 MAY 2012

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) is a complex disorder, characterised by severe disabling fatigue that does not improve with bed-rest and may worsen with physical or mental activity. People with CFS function at a significantly lower level of activity than before the onset of the condition.

Causes

The cause of CFS is not yet known. Several possible causes have been proposed, including:

- Iron deficiency anaemia (iron-poor blood)
- Low blood sugar (hypoglycaemia)
- Allergies to environmental agents e.g. pollutants
- Immune system dysfunction
- Systemic (i.e. affecting the whole body) infections. CFS was thought to be caused by a virus infection, most probably the Epstein-Barr virus. It is now generally accepted, however, that CFS is not caused by any single recognised infectious agent. The illness seems to prompt a chronic immune reaction in the body, but this may be a dysfunction of the immune system itself, rather than a response to an infection.
- HPA (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal) dysfunction: a brain disorder resulting in abnormal levels of hormones produced by the hypothalamus, pituitary or adrenal glands, which affect the stress

response system in the body. People with CFS often appear to be hypersensitive to stress.

- Mild, chronic low blood pressure (hypotension)
- Systemic yeast infection (candidiasis)
- Nutritional deficiencies

Treatment

There is no specific treatment for CFS. In general, treatment aims to relieve symptoms, using a combination of the following:

- **Lifestyle changes.** Your doctor will likely advise you to avoid excessive physical and psychological stress, and to slow down in general.
- **Exercise.** You may be encouraged, often with the help of a physical therapist, to follow an exercise programme in which physical activity is gradually and carefully increased up to your tolerance level. This can help prevent or decrease muscle weakness caused by prolonged inactivity, and can improve your energy level.
- **Treatment of psychiatric problems.** Problems often related to CFS, such as depression and anxiety, can be treated with medication and/or behaviour therapy, which teaches you helpful responses to difficult situations and symptoms.
- **Medication for specific symptoms:**
 - People with CFS often benefit from **antidepressants**, which, apart from improving mood, may help control pain and improve sleep.
 - **Analgesics and antipyretics or anti-inflammatory drugs** such as paracetamol and ibuprofen.
 - **Antihistamines** such as loratadine and **decongestants** that contain pseudoephedrine may relieve allergy-like symptoms.

You may need to try several drugs before finding one that is effective and can be tolerated. Some medications can cause adverse reactions or side-effects that are worse than the original symptoms. CFS patients tend to be unusually sensitive to drugs and must take doses that are less than standard doses. Consult your doctor before starting any treatment for CFS.