

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) is also called myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME). Its main symptom is extremely severe and long-term tiredness or fatigue. Other symptoms include muscular pains, joint pains, headaches, sore throats, swollen glands, disturbed sleep patterns and poor concentration. Most sufferers of the condition have at least one of these symptoms as well as chronic fatigue.

Diagnosis

There is no test for the condition. Blood tests are often done to rule out other conditions such as anaemia (low iron), under active thyroid and liver and kidney problems. It is often not diagnosed as its symptoms can vary greatly in people and it is not fully understood by the medical profession.

Cause

The term myalgic encephalomyelitis means inflammation on the brain however this term is now thought to be outdated as there is not thought to be any inflammation on the brain. Its cause is not known. Some theories suggest is caused by a virus, however this has not been proven. It is thought that there is a genetic link. Other factors that are thought to contribute to CFS and make it worse include exhaustion and mental stress, poor diet, depression and traumatic events such as bereavements.

How common is CFS

It is thought to affect about 1 in 300 of the population however this may be an underestimate as it is often misdiagnosed. It is estimated about 12000 people in Ireland suffer from the condition. It is about three times more common in women than men and the most common age for it starting is the early twenties to mid-forties. It can also occur in children with the 13 to 15 age group being the most common age for it to occur.

Treatment

Most sufferers of CFS will be referred to a specialist. Medication is not a major part of the management of CFS. Relaxation is very important when suffering from CFS. There are various techniques which can be used. Relaxation can benefit symptoms such as sleep, stress, anxiety and pain. A good sleep pattern is important. Getting the balance between enough and too much sleep is important. Too much sleep can actually exacerbate the problem. Sleeping during the day should be avoided. Rest (rather than sleep) should become an important part of daily routine. 30 minute periods of rest throughout the day can be beneficial. A balanced diet is important. Eating small, regular meals can help. Eating little and often can also relieve nausea which affects many sufferers of CFS. Carbohydrates such as bread, rice, potatoes, noodles and cereals are an important source of energy so incorporating plenty of them in your diet is important. More information on a balanced diet can be obtained in Whelehans. You can also book to see a qualified dietician for free by calling us at 04493 34591.

Cognitive behavioural therapy is a psychological therapy that plays a major role in the treatment of CFS. Research has shown it is can relieve the symptoms of CFS.

The components of cognitive behavioural therapy for CFS include psychological support, goal setting, developing a good sleep routine and energy and activity management.

Graded exercise therapy is a structured programme which involves the gradual increase in physical activity such as walking or swimming. It is adapted to suit each individual person and is closely monitored. It is normally supervised by a physiotherapist or occupational therapist that specialises in CFS.

Pacing is a technique often used to treat CFS. It is basically an energy management programme which helps the person balance their periods of rest and activity. However studies have not shown that pacing improves symptom of CFS. A major study whose results were published this year showed that Cognitive behavioural therapy and Graded exercise therapy were more effective at treating CFS than pacing. Painkillers and antidepressants are sometimes used to relieve the symptoms of pain and depression which is sometimes symptoms of CFS.

Outlook

Delays in the diagnosis and treatment of CFS can reduce the chance of improvement. In most case, people fluctuate between periods of improvement and flare ups of the condition. Most people show improvement over time especially with adequate treatment. Many people recover within two years but for some people the condition can last years. For people that recover, it is rare for the same energy levels they had before developing the condition to return. The rate of recovery is better for children and young adults who develop the condition.

More Help

The *Irish ME/CFS Association* have also launched a new edition of its booklet, "A Sufferer's and Carer's Guide to Living with ME/CFS", which contains advice on managing and treating the condition. Free copies are available by contacting them at 01 2350965 or emailing them at info@irishmecfs.org. Whelehans also have a new dietician service in store. This is a free service. This could be of help to anybody suffering from CFS or any other medical condition where diet plays an important part in its control. Call us at 04493 34591 to book your place.

Disclaimer: Information given is general; Please ensure you consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended

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