

Chronic Fatigue

conquer fatigue with a comprehensive program

Fatigue is one of the most common complaints of Americans today. At least 20 percent of all patients report fatigue as a significant problem in their lives. Three million Americans have been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS). Women are the most affected by the disease; as many as 70 percent of CFS cases are female. Millions more may suffer in silence, as this disease is sometimes difficult to diagnose. Although CFS has only recently been defined, the condition is not new. Medical literature from the 1860s describes a similar condition. Other names for CFS include chronic fatigue and immune dysfunction syndrome (CFIDS) and chronic Epstein-Barr virus (CEBV).

Considering the hectic lifestyles of most Americans, it's not surprising that so many of us are tired. However, CFS is more serious than simply a lack of rest. Researchers are only beginning to target possible causes for CFS. Many suspect that it is caused by thyroid, adrenal, liver, or immune system dysfunction. Author and women's health expert Susan Lark, M.D., explained that when a woman identifies fatigue as a key concern, one or more of the following body functions may be weak:

- The immune system.
- The endocrine or glandular system.
- The nervous system.

Another theory is that CFS is caused by a virus similar to the herpes virus. Existing physical conditions, such as anemia, diabetes, heart disease, lung disease, liver disease, or cancer may make the body vulnerable to CFS. In addition, prescription drugs, such as anti-hypertensives, birth control pills, or sedatives may trigger chronic fatigue.

In an article in the *Journal of Orthomolecular Medicine* (Vol. 9, No. 1, 1994), Dr. Emanuel Cheraskin explained, "However viewed, it is safe to conclude that fatigue is one of the, or the most, common signal in the health/sickness spectrum."

Disabling symptoms

CFS is characterized by debilitating fatigue and loss of stamina. For many individuals suffering from CFS, everyday tasks become physically overwhelming. Household chores, or even a short walk, can be exhausting or impossible for individuals with CFS. These patients often lack the energy to interact with friends and family.

The symptoms of chronic fatigue often mirror those of depression, making CFS difficult to diagnose. Patients with CFS may sleep for long periods; however, extended bed rest does not appear to improve their symptoms. Ironically, some patients with chronic fatigue may also experience insomnia. Other physical symptoms of CFS include:

- muscle or joint pain;
- headache;
- sore throat;
- lymph node pain;
- blurred or double vision;
- fever or night sweats;
- rash;
- diarrhea or constipation; and
- dizziness.

In addition to disabling physical symptoms, some CFS patients suffer from mental and emotional symptoms, such as:

- short-term memory loss;
- inability to remember specific names and places;
- difficulty in performing complex mental work; and
- depression.

Exercise and diet can help

Although the idea of exercising may seem overwhelming to someone suffering from chronic fatigue, most experts agree that moderate exercise can help boost the immune system and improve CFS symptoms. However, patients should not over-exert themselves. Individuals with CFS should avoid strenuous exercise and rest as soon as they begin to feel fatigued.

Diet can also play an important role in CFS treatment. Patients often discover that by modifying their diet, they can greatly improve their CFS symptoms. By choosing nutrient-rich foods that are easily digested, CFS patients can begin to take control. Good dietary choices include:

- Vegetables;
- Fruits;
- Starches;
- Legumes;
- Whole grains;
- Seeds and nuts; and
- Fish.

CFS patients may also find that certain foods intensify their symptoms. Foods that require more energy to digest may increase fatigue in CFS patients. Some foods that CFS patients may want to avoid include:

- Dairy products;
- Red meats and pork;

- Alcohol;
- Sugar; and
- Caffeine, including soda, coffee, and chocolate.

Stress reduction

Most experts agree that stress is a factor in CFS. Stress reduction can play an important role in CFS recovery. According to the *Chronic Fatigue Self Help Book* by Susan Lark, M.D., key ways to reduce stress include:

- **Meditation** induces relaxation; try thinking affirmative thoughts.
- **Visualization** can be combined with calming music to reduce stress. Focus on positive imagery.
- **Yoga** can improve circulation and may increase energy.
- **Massage** can also improve circulation and reduce stress.

Herbal symptom relief

The most debilitating symptom of CFS is a complete lack of energy. Some herbs used for energy enhancement include:

- **Siberian ginseng** (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*) and **Licorice root** (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) to support adrenal function and help the body cope with stress;
- **Ginkgo** (*Ginkgo biloba*) to enhance blood flow to the brain;
- **Dandelion root** (*Taraxacum officinale*) to support liver function and detoxification.

Many CFS patients also suffer from depression. The following herbs are known to enhance mood and a sense of well-being:

- **Chamomile**
- **Valerian root** (*Valeriana officinalis*);
- **Passionflower** (*Passiflora incarnata*); and
- **St. John's wort** (*Hypericum perforatum*).

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In a study at the University of California Department of Medicine (*Immunopharmacology* 35[3]:229-235, January 1997), echinacea (*Echinacea purpurea*) and ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) extracts enhanced cellular immune function in both healthy individuals and patients with depressed immune systems. Other herbs that are recognized for immune system enhancement include:

- **Shiitake mushrooms** (*Lentinus edodes*);
- **Garlic** (*Allium sativum*); and
- **Goldenseal** (*Hydrastis canadensis*).

Important supplements

Dietary supplements can provide great relief to individuals suffering from CFS. In a study of fibromyalgia and CFS, patients reported a significant improvement in symptoms after taking nutritional supplements. Experts recommend the following nutritional supplements for CFS patients:

- **Vitamin C** is an important antioxidant known to enhance immune function. Under stressful conditions, the body needs additional vitamin C to help the immune system function normally. Vitamin C promotes healthy adrenal function, which is especially helpful for women who suffer from stress. In one study of 411 married couples, researchers found a clear correlation between fatigue and low levels of vitamin C. Dr. Cheraskin describes the correlation between vitamin C and fatigue as the “new scurvy,” citing evidence that vitamin C deficiency can contribute to CFS.
- **Magnesium** is important for energy production, protein formation, and cellular replication. Most Americans are deficient in this mineral.
- **Iron deficiency** can lead to

chronic fatigue and anemia. Liver extracts are considered one of the best sources of iron.

- **Vitamin B complex** consists of 11 B vitamins, including folic acid, vitamin B₆, and vitamin B₁₂. Vitamin B₆ deficiency has been implicated in anemia and fatigue. Vitamin B₁₂ deficiency is believed to contribute to elevated homocysteine levels. High levels of homocysteine are believed to contribute to heart disease, the number-one killer disease in the United States. In addition, increased levels of homocysteine are characteristic of CFS patients. Researchers have also discovered that CFS subjects have lower levels of B vitamins than healthy patients.
- **Vitamin E**, an important antioxidant, protects cells against damage from toxins. It can enhance immune function and has antihistamine properties.
- **Potassium deficiency** has been linked to fatigue and muscle weakness. Potassium may help restore energy in some CFS patients.
- The amino acid **L-carnitine** has also demonstrated promise in providing relief for people with CFS. In a study featured in *Neuropsychobiology* (Vol. 35, No. 1, 1997), researchers found a statistically significant improvement in CFS symptoms after eight weeks of treatment.
- **NADH** is a coenzyme available as a nutritional supplement. A clinical study presented at the 1998

meeting of the American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology and later published in the *Annals of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology*, tested NADH in a double-blind, placebo-controlled, crossover fashion featuring patients with CFS. More than 73 percent of the patients showed significant improvement in clinical symptoms and energy levels. According to NADH developer Georg D. Birkmayer, M.D., “It (NADH) is the only compound where you can clearly demonstrate that it increases energy production on the cellular level.”

- **Essential fatty acids** in the form of flax oil and evening primrose oil have been shown to be beneficial to the cardiovascular and immune systems, as well as help ease depression and hormonal imbalances. Two quality human studies demonstrated that high doses of essential fatty acids can positively benefit individuals with CFS (*Acta Neurol Scan* Vol 99, 1999).
- **Iodine and tyrosine** have been shown to help alleviate fatigue caused by low thyroid function.

A word about fibromyalgia

CFS and fibromyalgia have a lot in common. Muscle aches, fatigue, headaches, sleep disturbances, psychological complaints, and weak adrenal function can accompany either of these conditions. The main difference, however, between the two disorders is that muscle pain is

typically the overriding feature in fibromyalgia, while prolonged, debilitating fatigue is the leading complaint of CFS. According to Canadian family physician, David Saul, M.D., people suffering with fibromyalgia may find symptom relief by using methylsulfonylmethane (MSM), malic acid, and noni juice.

Final thoughts

Lack of energy and a diagnosis of chronic fatigue syndrome can affect a person's quality of life. While you may think you must simply endure the hectic pace and live with your fatigue, remember that chronic fatigue does not have to be a way of life. If you are having trouble making it through each day, and if your fatigue is affecting your quality of life, you

need to see a healthcare professional.

You can take steps to take the fatigue out of your life and put the fun back in. By making some dietary and lifestyle changes, and incorporating specific nutrients and herbs into your daily routine, you may just be able to conquer your chronic fatigue.

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