

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

# Chronic fatigue syndrome

**Chronic fatigue syndrome is a frustrating and distressing illness that affects people of all ages. No one knows what causes it. 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. 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.

Chronic fatigue syndrome can last from a few months to many years, although the symptoms may come and go during that time.

## What are the symptoms?

The main symptom is feeling totally exhausted most of the time, mentally as well as physically. You may also have pain in your muscles, difficulty in sleeping, and mood changes.

Sometimes CFS starts after another illness, like a bad cold. 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 might have chronic fatigue, see your doctor. There's no simple test for CFS. But your doctor will check whether your tiredness might be caused by anything else.

Other conditions that can cause tiredness include:

- A long-lasting infection, anaemia, problems with your thyroid gland, or diabetes
- Depression
- Anorexia or bulimia
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Ongoing stress
- Being seriously overweight (obese).

Tiredness can also be caused by pregnancy or other hormonal changes.

It is important for your doctor to be sure that no other problems are causing your symptoms. If you do have another condition, your doctor may be able to cure it.

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## What treatments work?

Because no one knows what causes chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), there is no real cure. There are some treatments you can try that may help you feel less tired so you can be more active and enjoy life.

### Treatment without medicines

**Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)** is a form of talking treatment to change thinking and behaviour in a positive way. There's good evidence that it can help people with chronic fatigue syndrome feel less tired. Also, CBT may help children with chronic fatigue attend school more regularly.

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

There's good evidence that a **graded aerobic exercise** programme can help you feel less tired. Aerobic exercise is any continuous activity that makes your heart and lungs work faster. It includes walking, cycling, and swimming. Graded aerobic exercise builds up gradually from a gentle beginning.

There's no evidence that graded aerobic exercise can be harmful. But doctors believe that people with CFS may feel worse if they exercise too much too soon. So you should only do graded exercise supervised by a trained therapist.

**Pacing** is a treatment that aims to find the right balance between rest and activity. 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.

There's no good research to say whether pacing works. But it is a form of self-help that is popular with many patients and some doctors.

No one has done any research on whether people with chronic fatigue feel better if they **rest completely for a long time**. Most doctors don't recommend it. Studies on healthy people and people recovering from infections have found that long-term rest can make them feel worse. But we don't know enough to say whether this would be true for people with chronic fatigue.

### Treatment with medicines

Doctors have tried many medicines to treat chronic fatigue syndrome. But there's no good research to show that any of them work. Here are some of the medicines sometimes tried:

- Antidepressants. Your doctor may try these if he or she thinks you may be depressed. But there's no clear evidence they work for chronic fatigue syndrome
- Steroids, which are used to treat illnesses that affect the immune system
- Vitamin and mineral supplements

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- Evening primrose oil
- Magnesium injections
- Galantamine, a medicine used to treat people with dementia
- Drugs to boost the immune system, including immunoglobulin G, interferon alfa, aciclovir, and staphylococcus toxoid. Some of these drugs can cause serious side effects.

**Homeopathy** is a type of complementary medicine. It is based on the idea that 'like cures like'. There's no good research to show that homeopathy can help with chronic fatigue.

### What will happen to me?

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) can go on for years. Although CFS can make you feel very ill and miserable, it's not dangerous.

The good news is 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, like depression.

### Where to get more help

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, which advises the government on health care, has written some guidelines about how people with CFS should be cared for. You can find out more on the NICE website (<http://www.nice.org.uk>).

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