

Too Much Stress And CFS

By: Dr. Jesse A. Stoff, M.D.

Tired? Fatigued? Worn down? Most of us have felt that way sometimes, but usually a good day's rest will set us straight. But, for some, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) can be a debilitating disorder which can interfere with daily activities for prolonged periods of time--even to the point where the simplest tasks become major hurdles. According to the Centers for Disease Control, which now fully recognizes this disorder, CFS occurs in approximately eight million Americans. It strikes people who suffer from overwhelming levels of stress for a long period of time. As a result of the stress, there is a progressive weakening of the immune system, which allows viruses and other infections to become chronically active.

From a physiological point of view, stress means that a person is expending energy faster than their body can regenerate. The source of the stress can, initially, come from traumatic events such as a divorce, job change or death in the family. Stress can also come from ongoing sources such as dissatisfaction with a job, marital strife, excessive alcohol consumption, exposure to chemicals, and various nutritional deficiencies. CFS is one of the most misunderstood and mistreated diseases. Most people who are afflicted usually end up going on a medical merry-go-round. They are unsure of where to seek help and end up being referred from specialist to specialist. The problem is that CFS is not one single disease, but rather a syndrome made up of a variety of factors. Some of the symptoms of CFS may include severe debilitating tiredness, a sore throat, swollen glands, recurrent low- grade fevers, headaches, joint and muscle pains, difficulty in concentration, moodiness and trouble sleeping.

To a certain extent CFS is a syndrome of exclusion. This means that fairly extensive laboratory testing is required in order to differentiate true CFS from the many other disorders (like depression, cancer, lyme disease and multiple sclerosis) that can initially have similar symptoms.

In addition to ruling out other illnesses, the laboratory tests will indicate the abnormalities that are occurring in the immune system. What I have found in my practice is that if you can address enough of the right "little problems," the big problems will usually take care of themselves. Therefore, based upon the findings of the laboratory tests, the treatment strategy for CFS may include a variety of approaches. It can include taking a variety of vitamins, minerals and supplements, while at the same time making some very significant lifestyle changes. Some of the important vitamins and minerals include beta- carotene and vitamin A, vitamin C, zinc, B-complex and magnesium.

As surprising as it may seem, exercise is an important part of the treatment strategy as well. Start with just three to five minutes a day and gradually increase to 20-to-30. As your aerobic activity (i.e. walking) increases so does your blood flow and oxygen level. This is helpful in combating chronic infections. Diet is also a very important part of the treatment. A simple low stress diet is often enough. This would mean no red meat, fried

foods, alcohol, coffee, smoking, etc. Sticking with grains, vegetables and some chicken, fish or turkey is very helpful. A balanced diet is critical because it supplies the body with the nutrients it needs to repair itself.

Sleep is another important factor in the process towards recovery. This is not a quantity issue, but rather a quality problem. It is important for your circadian cycles to get as much sleep as possible between 9 p.m. and 3 a.m. It is also important for a patient to develop a good sense of balance and perspective about their life. Often, the energy to initiate projects returns before the stamina to complete them does. So it is critical that patients choose their battles carefully. There is only so much energy the body can produce and much of it must go toward repairing the metabolism and immune system and cannot be wasted.

CFS is a highly treatable disorder whereby the patient can return to full, but not excessive, function and activity. But alas, it is also a disorder for which there is no cure. As the body recovers and fights off the infectious agents, the immune system is left with a residual guard function to protect the person from relapse. However, if the person should ever again be exposed to excessive levels of stress for a prolonged period of time, CFS is always a threat to raise its ugly head yet again.