

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS): helping your child to get better

Factsheet for parents and teachers

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet aims to explain what chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) is, its causes and symptoms, and offers practical advice about how to get help for a young person who is suffering from it.

Introduction

What is CFS?

The main symptom is extreme tiredness, which is not caused by any other physical illness, and which can dominate your life. It often starts as a flu-like illness. Common symptoms include:

- headaches
- aching muscles
- swollen glands.

Like other severe physical illnesses, CFS has some important emotional and psychological effects (see Factsheet 27 on chronic physical illnesses). This does not mean that it is 'all in the mind', but that the whole person is affected. It can be a long road to recovery.

What are the psychological effects of CFS?

Generally, the child or young person may have the following symptoms:

- feeling depressed
- feeling irritable
- feeling anxious
- having difficulty sleeping
- losing interest in food
- finding it difficult to concentrate or remember things
- feeling extremely tired
- getting headaches.

The disorder can seriously disrupt normal life. Your child may be unable to:

- carry out their usual activities
- go out and see friends
- carry on with their hobbies.

School can be very difficult to cope with. Young people with CFS may quickly become very unfit

from staying in bed, or just doing not very much for a long time. This causes rapid muscle loss – even in healthy people. All these complications make recovery more difficult.

Everyone in the family can feel the strain. You may have to give up work to nurse your sick child. Brothers and sisters may feel that they are being neglected. Parents may disagree about whether the child is really sick, or is just attention-seeking.

How can I get help?

The diagnosis of CFS can be difficult. In the early stages of the illness, it may seem that no one knows what the problem is and how to solve it. This can upset the child, who may feel that no one believes that they are ill or understands. Relationships can become difficult at home and at school.

Your general practitioner or school doctor will be able to refer your child to a paediatrician or child psychiatrist for treatment. The school, including the school nurse and psychologist, will be able to help with problems at school. The support and encouragement of family and friends are very important for good recovery.

Treatment

The aim is to help the child or young person with CFS to gradually resume normal activities. A programme of gradually increasing gentle activity will help to rebuild your child's muscles and fitness.

Family or individual counselling can help in overcoming depression, anxiety, lack of confidence, poor motivation, or family and relationship problems. It can be important to look at ways of getting your child's education back on track by talking with your child's teachers.

Sources of further information

- Royal College of Physicians, Royal College of General Practitioners & Royal College of Psychiatrists (1996) *Chronic Fatigue Syndrome* (Council Report CR54). London: Royal Colleges of Physicians, General Practitioners & Psychiatrists. www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications.
- YoungMinds provides information and advice on child mental health issues. 102–108 Clerkenwell Rd, London EC1M 5SA; Parents' Information Service 0800 018 2138; www.youngminds.org.uk.
- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems, including discipline, behavioural problems and conduct disorder, and stimulant medication. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel. 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk.

Carers can also feel stressed. You have to be very patient, but also determined and optimistic, even when things seem bleak and uncertain.

Often it is hard to know when to encourage your child, when to comfort them or when to put pressure on them. You may also find some expert advice helpful.

It can be helpful for everyone involved in helping a child with CFS to meet and talk about progress from time to time. This allows everyone to share ideas about the best ways forward – physical, psychological and educational. Working as a team is important and a regular review of progress is essential.

References

- Carr, A. (ed.) (2000) *What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and their Families*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
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