

## Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

### What is it?

Chronic fatigue syndrome is a condition that can be debilitating and last for months or years. It is an illness that produces extreme tiredness over a prolonged period of time.

With symptoms so variable, it is often misdiagnosed or is not recognized. Chronic fatigue syndrome is a long-term condition. Many people find that the symptoms are at their worst in the first one to two years. In more than half the cases, the condition clears up completely after several years. In some cases, the syndrome comes and goes over a number of years.

### How many people are afflicted?

It is hard to estimate, but some figures indicate around 500,000 people in the United States have chronic fatigue syndrome. It mainly affects women from 25 through 45, but can affect children or adults at any age.

### What are the causes?

It's believed that several different factors can cause chronic fatigue syndrome, but the cause is not known for certain. Sometimes it develops after recovery from a viral infection or an emotional trauma such as bereavement. In other cases, there is no specific preceding illness or life event. It's also thought to be associated with [depression](#).

### What are its symptoms?

The number and severity of symptoms can vary, however the major symptoms are:

Prolonged severe fatigue lasting at least six months

Impairment of short-term memory or concentration

Sore throat

Tender lymph nodes

Muscle and joint pain without swelling or redness

Un-refreshing sleep

[Headaches](#)

Fatigue can also be a symptom of several medical conditions such as:

[Sleep apnea](#), insomnia or other sleep disturbances

[Hypothyroidism](#)

[Depression](#)

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Hepatitis

Anemia

Heart disease

Perimenopause

Nocturnal asthma

Allergies

Alcohol and substance abuse

Domestic violence and abuse

Viral or bacterial infections

[Cancer](#)

### How is it diagnosed?

If you have had prolonged fatigue for more than six months with no obvious cause, your doctor may suspect chronic fatigue syndrome. A general physical examination may be performed and you may be asked psychological questions to find out if psychological problems are present. Blood tests may also be arranged. Keep in mind, though, that diagnosis can take some time since there is no specific diagnostic test.

## Annals of Internal Medicine Patient Summaries

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