

WORK OUT CHRONIC FATIGUE

It is estimated that more than 1 million Americans have chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), an illness defined as profound disabling fatigue lasting six months or more plus at least four of the following: impaired memory or concentration, sore throat, tender glands, aching or stiff muscles, multijoint pain, new headaches, unrefreshing sleep, and fatigue following exercise or exertion.

CFS was dubbed the “yuppie flu” in the 1980s, though now it’s well-known that the illness doesn’t discriminate based on age, race or socioeconomic status. But it does tend to strike women more often, making them four times more likely to develop CFS than men. People in their 40s and 50s are most susceptible, though CFS can develop at any age, including during childhood and adolescence.

There is no cure for this mysterious illness. Over time the symptoms vanish for some people, while other individuals remain debilitated by the disease for years. Because the cause is largely unknown, treatment focuses primarily on relieving symptoms. But one of the best treatments—exercise—is diligently avoided by many people with CFS.

Exercise for Energy

If you suffer from CFS, you’ve probably experienced exercise intolerance in which even small amounts of physical activity worsen your fatigue and other symptoms. But research suggests that exercise helps improve fatigue, functional status and fitness. Not convinced? Some people with CFS have found that if they learn more about the benefits of exercise, they are more motivated to give it a try. Information alone may not lure you to the gym, but it may help you to consider making a change.

Start Low and Go Slow

Once you’ve decided to start an exercise program, talk with your physician. Chances are he or she will give you the go ahead and ample encouragement. Then, the key is to not overdo it. Many people mistakenly engage in a “push-crash” cycle of activity in which they go hard and soon after experience severe debilitating post-exertional fatigue. The trick is to slowly begin an exercise program and gradually increase intensity, duration or frequency. That may mean starting with activities of daily living such as getting out of bed, taking care of personal hygiene, cleaning the house or checking the mail. Back off before illness and fatigue are made worse.

As your physical-activity tolerance improves, begin a more structured exercise program that will eventually include cardiovascular training, resistance training and flexibility. Start with several daily sessions of brief (five minutes or less) low-impact activity such as walking. For every minute of activity, take three minutes to rest. Try to build up to a total of 20 minutes per day but don’t push it. If you start to feel too fatigued, rest, and stick with the more tolerable

level of activity for a week or two before trying to advance.

You can incorporate simple strengthening and stretching exercises when you feel ready. Start with exercises that only require body weight for resistance such as wall push-ups or picking up and grasping objects. Go for a set of two to four repetitions to start, with the goal to build up to eight repetitions. As these exercises become easier, add resistance bands or light free weights. End every session with light stretching.

You Can Do It

People with CFS feel limited to enjoy the benefits of an active life. It won’t be easy to get started, but once you do you may be surprised how daily exercise can help you to reclaim your life. If you want to begin an activity program but don’t know how or where to start, an ACE-certified Advanced Health & Fitness Specialist or other qualified fitness professional can help you get off on the right foot.

Additional Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: www.cdc.gov/cfs

Medline Plus—Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/chronicfatigue_syndrome.html

Mayo Clinic—Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: www.mayoclinic.com/health/chronic-fatigue-syndrome/DS00395/DSECTION=treatments-and-drugs.

If you are interested in information on other health and fitness topics, contact: American Council on Exercise, 4851 Paramount Drive, San Diego, CA 92123, 800-825-3636; or, go online at www.acefitness.org/GetFit and access the complete list of ACE Fit Facts:™



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