



Fibromyalgia & Chronic Fatigue Syndromes: Natural Ways to Address Their Overlapping Complexities

I was diagnosed [with chronic fatigue] . . . by the head of infectious disease at Johns Hopkins. It was the most hellish year of my life. I went from doctor to doctor. I got very thin and lost 22 pounds in a month. One doctor thought I was anorexic and lectured me about it. . . . When my doctor at Johns Hopkins finally said, "You have a real disease," that was an important moment for me.

~ Laura Hillenbrand,
Author of *Seabiscuit & Unbroken*,
well.blogs.nytimes.com.

Do you suffer from chronic exhaustion or severe pain throughout your body? Have your traditional doctors advised you that your symptoms are psychosomatic after tests have enabled them to rule out hormonal imbalance, anemia, and cardiovascular, thyroid, Lyme, and other diseases? You may have chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) or fibromyalgia syndrome (FMS), two distinct but related conditions with overlapping symptoms. Rest assured that the physical and psychological challenges of these disorders are very real. Though you should not attempt to diagnose or treat yourself, you can begin to heal by examining your condition's symptoms, potential causes, and available natural treatments.

What Are CFS & FMS?

Understanding the concept of "syndrome" is the first challenge in combatting CFS or FMS. A syndrome is a complex array of symptoms that frequently occur together and may mimic other illnesses. With CFS and FMS (which especially affect women ages 20-50), medical tests often do not detect any problems. Traditional doctors thus often dismissively diagnose the condition as hypochondria, psychosomatic illness, or depression. While theories abound, experts do not agree on what causes the disorders, there are no known cures, and the conditions are thought to seriously damage the immune system long-term.

CFS

The current definition of CFS is unexplained disabling fatigue lasting more than 6 months that reduces activity by more than 50%. CFS resembles the flu and other viral infections. Its symptoms may include sleep disturbances, mild fever, anxiety, depression, difficulty concentrating and poor memory, muscle aches and pains, headaches, intestinal problems, extreme menstrual discomfort, chemical, environmental, light, heat and food (especially gluten and dairy) sensitivities, mood swings, low blood pressure, and upper respiratory tract infections (including those of the sinuses).

The potential causes of CFS include: (1) viral infection [including Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) and cytomegalovirus (CMV), members of the herpes virus family that also cause mononucleosis]; (2) intestinal and systemic overgrowth of candida albicans, a fungus; (3) a generally suppressed immune system; (4) hypoglycemia; (5) hypothyroidism; (6) mercury poisoning, especially from dental fillings; (7) intestinal parasites; (8) food allergies; and (9) extreme stress/exhausted adrenal glands.

FMS

FMS is a rheumatic disorder similar to CFS but more greatly characterized by non-inflammatory chronic pain (vs. fatigue) with no obvious physical cause. However, research has shown that the axis connecting the three glands primarily responsible for the stress response (hypothalamus, pituitary, adrenals) may be dysfunctional in FMS patients.

The pain tends to affect the fibrous tissues, muscles, tendons, and ligaments, and there are 18 "trigger points" throughout the body that are abnormally sensitive to the touch. These points tend to cluster around the neck, shoulders, chest, knees, elbows, and hips. FMS also shares with CFS the other symptoms noted above.

The Conventional Approach

Conventional medical treatments for both CFS and FMS focus on alleviating symptoms, and many of the suggested treatments and lifestyle changes are the same or similar. For CFS, anti-anxiety drugs (benzodiazepines), antidepressants, hydrocortisone (for inflammation), and pain relievers (aspirin, ibuprofen, or acetaminophen) may be beneficial.

Although other drugs are prescribed off label, the FDA has approved only three to treat FMS. Lyrica is an anti-epileptic drug. Cymbalta and Savella are antidepressants in the category of drugs known as selective serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs). Antidepressants are prescribed to diminish pain and improve sleep. Numbing medicine can be sprayed onto or injected into trigger points to assist muscle stretching. While oral pain relievers may also be recommended, one double-blind trial found no difference between ibuprofen and placebo with respect to treating FMS symptoms. Traditional practitioners also tend to recommend the lifestyle modifications noted below.

A 5-Pronged Natural Approach

Notwithstanding the lacking consensus among practitioners regarding CFS and FMS treatment, this writer has relieved their symptoms in clinical practice. The proper nutritional regimen for both disorders should address: (1) reduction of pain and inflammation; (2) adrenal fatigue; (3) immunity; (4) depression; and (5) lifestyle modification. An experienced practitioner should be able to recommend efficacious doses. Lifestyle changes and certain complementary bodywork remedies can also provide relief.

Pain & Inflammation

Omega-3 and omega-6 essential fatty acids (EFAs) are well-established natural anti-inflammatories. The correct doses of EPA and DHA, ideally from fish oil, produce anti-inflammatory, immune-supporting, hormone-like prostaglandins (PGE1 and PGE3). GLA, found in evening primrose, borage, and black currant seed oils, is an omega-6 fatty acid that converts to PGE1.

Curcumin is a polyphenol in the spice turmeric. Studies indicate that this herb (especially in the highly bioavailable form of patent-pending BCM95) safely combats inflammation and pain principally by inhibiting the cytokine NF-kappaB, which acts like a switch to turn on the genes that produce the body's inflammatory responses. Curcumin also reduces inflammation by inhibiting other cytokines and COX-2 and 5-LOX activity. In both CFS and FMS, magnesium malate can relieve muscle spasms by acting as a drug.

Adrenal Fatigue

The adrenal glands are responsible for producing adrenaline, noradrenaline, cortisol, cortisone and hydrocortisone, testosterone, estrogen, cholesterol, progesterone, and a number of other hormones.

Adrenaline and cortisol are among the hormones responsible for the balance of body fluids, blood sugar, blood pressure, and many other key metabolic functions of the body. According to James L. Wilson, D.C., N.D., Ph.D., author of *Adrenal Fatigue: The 21st Century Stress Syndrome*, adrenal fatigue may predispose a person to the onset of CFS or may exacerbate its symptoms. He also maintains that those with FMS likely experience some degree of adrenal fatigue either as a cause or result of the disorder.

B-Complex, especially in the co-enzyme form, high-dosage pantothenic acid (B5), adrenal and spleen glandulars, NADH, L-carnitine, and co-enzyme Q10 (ubiquinol), all produce cellular energy and boost the adrenal glands.

Immunity

Helping the body to combat immunity challenges, including viruses and candidiasis, is a critical component of CFS and FMS treatment. The proper doses of Vitamin A, Vitamin D (with calcium and magnesium), AHCC (a compound extracted from medicinal mushrooms that boosts white blood cell activity), zinc picolinate, astragalus, thymus extract, and L-lysine, are indicated.

It is important to restore the proper balance of good and bad bacteria in the intestines with a special candida-eliminating diet and a high-quality, enteric coated probiotic with a high bacteria count and at least 8 bacteria strains. Grapefruit seed extract, caprylic acid, odorless garlic, and pau d'arco also help reduce candida overgrowth.

Depression

The fourth treatment prong should address the depression that frequently results from chronic pain, adrenal fatigue, and immune suppression. 5HTP helps increase common serotonin deficiencies, while two double-blind studies demonstrated the ability of SAMe to reduce both depression and pain.

Lifestyle Modifications

Recommended CFS/FMS lifestyle regimens generally focus on exercise, diet, sleep, environment, and psychological support. Daily, moderate, low-impact, aerobic exercise and stretching techniques are critical.

Maintaining a healthy diet is likewise imperative. A "healthy diet" in this context: (1) excludes saturated, hydrogenated, or trans fats (beef, pork, lamb, or duck), gluten, dairy, caffeine, alcohol, and MSG; (2) minimizes simple carbohydrates; and (3) includes fish, chicken, turkey, and as many raw foods as possible, such as low-sugar fruits (berries and apples), nuts and seeds (almonds, walnuts, and pumpkin seeds), legumes, and a large variety of dark green and cruciferous vegetables (broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts).

Reducing stress through psychological counseling, meditation, and proper sleep management (6-9 hours/night; catnaps when needed and only if they don't interfere with night rest), will likely provide relief. Proper chiropractic care, acupuncture, deep pressure massage, light therapy, and avoiding cigarette smoke and extreme temperatures, can also be helpful.

Conclusion

Many disorders, including Lyme disease, depression, and hepatitis, can cause the symptoms of FMS and CFS. If you suffer chronic muscular pain and/or fatigue for more than a week or so, seek the guidance of a health care professional with expertise in alternative medicine.

Submitted by Michael Dworkin, P.D., M.S., a Registered Pharmacist and State Certified Clinical Nutritionist (CT Certification No. 232), with Erika Dworkin, Dip.C.N./Board Cert. Holistic Nutrition (pending). Owner of the Manchester Parkade Health Shoppe (860.646.8178, cthealthshop.com, 378 West Middle Turnpike, Manchester), Pharmacist Dworkin has been guiding patients since 1956 and is available for consultation by appointment. Erika is available to speak to groups. References are available upon request. The statements in this article have not been evaluated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. None of the natural remedies discussed herein are intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease.