



# Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME)

## OVERVIEW

ME, or chronic post-viral fatigue syndrome, is a chronic, disabling condition of children and young adults which causes distress, loss of schooling and social contact and results in major functional disability. It is becoming more widely recognised, especially in the school population but there is still a great deal of confusion about its diagnosis and management. It can occur sporadically in individuals and families or as a small epidemic. It is more common among girls than boys. ME also occurs among adults who have close contact with small children, who are probably the reservoir of infection.

To avoid unnecessary alarm, it is important to realise that there are many conditions, other than ME, that can cause tiredness and muscular fatigue in young people. These may be the long-term consequences of physical illnesses or surgery or of other acute, flu-like illnesses, such as glandular fever. They may also be due to other long-term illnesses, such as diabetes, asthma, and anorexia or to accidents or emotional traumas like bereavement, family disruption, divorce or even abuse. Doctors need to consider all these factors, along with the previous personality and activity levels of the affected child or young adult, before reaching a diagnosis of ME. Further complicating the diagnosis is the knowledge that in some cases the onset of ME is very gradual, starting at an early age.

ME is thought to be an abnormal response to an infectious agent such as the Epstein-Barr virus or other viruses. However, because these viruses are also associated with other diseases, it is of more use to think of ME as being due to a run-down immune system affecting both the nervous system and the endocrine or hormonal system. Viewed in this way, there is far greater scope for treatment than by trying to identify a specific virus. There may also be exposure to toxic chemicals such as pesticides, lead and mercury which can deplete protective minerals such as selenium and zinc and increase the risk of bacterial, fungal, viral or yeast infections occurring.

This illness demands sympathetic palliative treatment. Adequate rest and adjustment of lifestyle (pacing) are essential, enabling recovery to take place gradually and there are a range of measures that can help the those affected.

Rest is most important in the early, acute stage of the illness, when there is evidence of active viral infection or some other provoking factor. In the period that follows this active phase, those affected should be encouraged to pace themselves, to live within the energy levels they have left. This is difficult to judge, but as a general rule, no mental or physical activity should be undertaken that causes fatigue lasting for more than a few hours. Sufferers should develop a regimen of energy expenditure and rest which is constant from day to day and which does not result in excessive fatigue at any time. Signs of tiring should be treated as a signal to stop and rest. Total bed-rest should be avoided except in the initial, acutely ill phase of the illness. In the severely affected, however, bed-rest will do no harm and, in fact, may be essential.

Children with the mild form of the illness should be encouraged to continue with their schooling as far as possible. However, games, PE, long journeys and excessive homework should be avoided. A reduction in school hours and the number of subjects being studied for exams may be necessary, so good contact with the school authorities is essential. These restrictions may be relaxed as symptoms improve. Activity programmes should be developed only by professionals who are experienced in the management of this illness.

Simply identifying this condition can be a great relief for the both the child and their family, reducing their stress and enabling them to cope better with the symptoms. Palliative treatment should be based on the degree of disability, including mental and psychological problems. It should be built around appropriate levels of rest with exercise and lifestyle adjustments as needed. All activities should be prioritised on a daily basis.

## DEFINITION

Myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME): a debilitating disorder whose symptoms include exhaustion, muscle weakness and pain, difficulty in walking and concentrating, along with poor short-term memory. This disorder is thought to be due to acute encephalomyelitis (inflammation of brain and spinal cord) with the additional involvement of the muscles.

It is now suggested that reduction in mitochondrial number and function (the feed-forward cycle) may underlie the problems with fatigue. The cell cannot literally produce enough energy for proper function and builds up harmful metabolites if the energy requirements exceed the ability of the sufferer to produce energy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Dietary changes

Medical research shows that a diet consisting mainly of organic, fresh, preferably raw vegetable foods, like grated carrot and sprouted seedlings are beneficial. This type of diet should provide all the micronutrients, like vitamins and minerals which the body needs for optimum health. Organic vegetables may contain 20-30% more of these micronutrients and on average contain a third the level of pesticide residue than factory-farmed produce.

Useful additions to this diet include oily fish (salmon, mackerel, etc) which provide fat soluble vitamins and the essential fatty acids, which aid nerve and muscle function. The fish should be organically farmed or fished from non-polluted water (although in reality these do not exist as all the oceans are interconnected), Due to pollution fish tend to accumulate heavy metals, especially in their livers. For this reason, cod liver oil and other fish liver oils are not recommended (see information in the 'Fish Oil' leaflet)

Sources of protein should include the beans and pulses, particularly soya beans and the vegetable proteins produced from them. These do not contain the hormones, antibiotics and other drugs routinely injected into farm animals used for meat products. Also, they do not contain the saturated fats that meat does, particularly red meat. Buy organic meat.

### What to avoid

Don't eat processed foods or foods containing hydrogenated fats, like margarine. These fats are not a natural part of our diet and are difficult for the body to digest and deal with.

Processed foods contain many additives, preservatives, colourings and stabilisers, which can cause problems for the nervous and endocrine systems.

Avoid caffeine drinks (tea, coffee and cola) because they can cause dehydration and irritate the digestive tract and nervous system. Try to drink at least 4 pints of water daily instead.

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## Lifestyle changes

Relaxation techniques, like autogenic training and meditation have been shown to help people with ME. This condition is often found in people who drive themselves hard, trying to over-achieve and therefore not allowing themselves enough rest. The relaxation techniques are a good way to reduce the effects of this sort of stressful over-activity. You should practice them for at least 15 minutes every day. Deep breathing is also effective. We can identify Autogenic Trainers in your area or visit [www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk](http://www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk) for a list of practitioners.

Exercise should be started again as soon as energy levels permit. It is important, however, not to overdo this. Begin with simple stretching exercises. Then as energy levels improve, you should try to take a 5 minute walk increasing slowly to 15 minute walk each day. Graduated exercise programs have been shown to improve the speed of recovery (measured by an increase in the ability of the body to utilise oxygen).

## Supplements

There is controversy over the role of supplementation in ME, however, because

- Type B malnutrition is common in the UK and specific deficiencies such as Iron, Zinc and Chromium can each affect the cells energy pathways.
- Selenium status is poor and affects resistance to viruses, thyroid and immune function and other important things such as membrane protection through glutathione peroxidase levels.
- The B Vitamins affect hormone and brain transmitter balance.
- Omega 3 poly unsaturated fatty acid intake is low in the UK and these PUFAs affect brain function, transmitter levels and the cell membrane characteristics of other membranes in the body that can be disrupted e.g. leaky bowel and irritable bowel syndromes are common in ME.
- Magnesium may be relatively deficient and be important in muscle mitochondrial function.

## HOMEOPATHY

Homeopathic treatment along with appropriate supplementation can greatly improve the symptoms of M.E. Please contact Pauline to discuss this.

For recommended suppliers and supplement advice please contact Pauline.

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