

health

The fatigue factor

If constant exhaustion is your main grouse, then you should be aware about Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. SAVIA RAJAGOPAL speaks to experts to find out more about this malady

Multi-tasking is the order of the day. Women run around managing a home, whizzing through chores, and being a super employee – all within a single day! It's no wonder then, many women complain of feeling overwhelmed and fatigued. While it may be only human to feel tired, an extended period of exhaustion should be a cause for worry. You could be suffering from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), a condition of extreme fatigue, combining both physical and psychological factors.

CFS SYMPTOMS

Pointing out the symptoms of CFS, Dr. Shamsah Sonawalla, consultant psychiatrist, Jaslok Hospital and

Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, USA, says, "CFS is characterised by severe fatigue for at least six months, which interferes substantially with occupational, educational, social, or personal activities. It is not alleviated by rest; and cannot be explained by another medical or psychiatric condition."

The fatigue must be accompanied by at least four of eight specified symptoms, which are listed below:

Unusual post-exertional fatigue lasting at least 24 hours

Significantly impaired memory or concentration

Sleep is not refreshing

Sore throat

Tender lymph nodes

Muscle pain

Joint pain

Headaches

TRIGGER POINT

Studies show that a combination of psychological and physical factors can be attributed to the syndrome. However, it is difficult to pin-point an exact cause. Sudden, severe psychological stress may trigger off the syndrome. Serious life events and other stressful situations have been found to precipitate the disorder, explains Dr. Sonawalla. She further adds that certain personality

types and individuals in high-stress jobs are more susceptible to this condition. Clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, Seema Hingorrany, claims that this syndrome affects women in the working age group of 25 to 50 years. "Many a time, women forget to take a break to slow down. They try to cram 36 hours of work in 24! Women nowadays have a career and they also have to balance a home. Physically, it could be due to a lack of vitamin B12 or lack of iron in the body," she adds.

GETTING TO THE ROOT OF IT

Since the exact cause cannot be determined, diagnosis can be difficult and symptoms often overlap with other disorders. Medically, there are no specified laboratory tests specially for CFS. However, as Dr. Sonawalla points out, it is important to rule out major depressive disorder, infections, extreme exercise and excessive stress, before diagnosing CFS. In most cases, fatigue can be relieved with adequate rest. However, longstanding fatigue can be indicative of a serious health problem. A number of more serious conditions may also cause persistent fatigue. For e.g. Infectious Mononucleosis and Epstein-Barr Virus, Autoimmune Diseases such as Rheumatoid Arthritis, Psychosis and Severe Mental Disorders and certain sleep disorders.

TREATMENT MODE

Medical experts unanimously agree that a complete lifestyle overhaul is needed to combat CFS. Visiting a general physician is a good idea but sometimes it can be a frustrating experience as an accurate diagnosis is difficult. Hingorrany states that the simplest solution is to discuss feelings with a family member, friend or medical professional. She also stresses the importance of taking breaks at regular intervals. This applies to both working women as well as housewives. She reiterates that monitoring one's health by way of regular checks and general care is imperative. According to Dr. Sonawalla, adequate sleep, graded exercises, a healthy diet and managing stress are the key factors.

STUDY

The survey, 'Chronic fatigue in developing countries: population based survey of women in India', found that more than one in 10 of the 2,494 women, aged 18-50, complained of chronic fatigue.

