

Post Viral Fatigue

Introduction - Symptoms - Management

Introduction

This handout is concerned with tiredness caused by viral infection, and how best to cope with it

- **MONONUCLEOSIS.** may be caused by the Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV) and is accompanied by serological changes in the blood of those affected. The peak incidence occurs among teenagers and its seasonal prevalence is highest in autumn and winter. The normal signs include sore throat, swollen tonsils, swollen and tender cervical lymph glands and general fatigue.
- **FLU VIRUSES.** Flu viruses are associated initially with a variety of non-specific short-term respiratory infections. The most common infections are the coughs and colds often related to seasonal changes. At the other end of the spectrum is full-blown influenza, with fever, headaches, aching limbs, severe discomfort, sweating and a general feeling of debility.
- **FATIGUE.** The fatigue that may result from both conditions is not in itself a cause for alarm. Given plenty of rest, sleep and an absence of stress, the fatigue will abate within a few weeks. However, if the sufferer is convalescing and at the same time attempting to cope with the stress of meeting academic deadlines, specific difficulties may arise. Also, if the immune system has been under stress due to a history of previous illness or to a regime of excessive exercise, the residual effects of the illness may persist over a period of months, and the problems may become more chronic and difficult to resolve.

Although many cases of flu will be subclinical in their symptoms with individuals not bothering to report anything unusual, a small number will involve extreme fatigue and require careful management.

Symptoms

PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL

Should fatigue persist beyond a few weeks, it is possible that a combination of **some** of the following physical or psychological symptoms may be present.

- **SLEEP.** The need for sleep may initially seem excessive; periods of 10-15 hours per day in bed are not uncommon.
- **APPETITE.** Often poor, which may result in haphazard eating patterns.
- **OVER-TIREDNESS.** It's tempting to try and stick to previous schedules of activity. If you fail to adjust to your lower energy levels, over-tiredness can quickly set in. This may lead into a vicious circle of inability to cope, frustration, a sense of inertia, depression, spells of weepiness and general pessimism, making further efforts even more self-defeating.
- **CONCENTRATION.** Mental lethargy: inability to concentrate on an activity for any length of time (mental sluggishness can be confusing if your reserves of physical energy are still adequate).

- **INTROSPECTION.** Fatigue can have a devastating effect on your perception of where you stand in relation to your course. You may start to doubt your interest in your subjects, your motivation, and even your decision to be at university. Self-criticism may include describing yourself as 'lazy' rather than lacking in energy. Your sense of bewilderment may cause you to entertain specific fears such as 'I think I am agoraphobic, etc?' or general fears such as 'I feel I am going mad'.
- **MOOD SWINGS.** Rapid alterations of mood can occur: e.g. periods of energy can give way to overwhelming fatigue, with feelings of buoyancy quickly submerged by feelings of depression.
- **RETREATING FROM LIFE.** With little energy at your disposal, you may start to retreat into your shell, cutting yourself off from friends, from hobbies and interests. Even coping with the social rituals of everyday life such as small talk over lunch or supermarket shopping may prove too much to handle. Your room may become a refuge, where you spend most of your time, out of touch with the rest of the world. Hence the understandable fears about agoraphobia, due to a lack of energy rather than to a proneness to neurosis.
- **LACK OF SOCIAL CONTACT.** The retreat from enjoyable social relationships may be accompanied by feelings of failure and inadequacy. Former close friends may be unable to understand what is wrong, and unsympathetic as you withdraw from activities.
- **LOSS OF CONFIDENCE.** Because energy levels appear at first to be so random and unpredictable, it may become difficult to take yourself for granted and be confident of meeting deadlines. An 'If, perhaps, maybe I'll get it done' syndrome can develop as determination and willpower falter.
- **VULNERABILITY.** During a prolonged period of fatigue, you can lose sight of your former healthy self and live with an acute sense of how vulnerable you are to stress. Instead of feeling relatively robust in your everyday dealings, with plenty of energy in reserve, even small incidents can become stressful so that panic and anxiety are never far away.
- **AFTERMATH.** In the aftermath, it is possible that if the condition has persisted for some time, the awareness of having lived in somewhat of a limbo will lead to feelings of depression; during which you try to make up for lost time and reconcile yourself to the changes that have occurred in yourself.

MANAGEMENT

MEDICAL

- See your GP.
- If the condition persists, return for regular check-ups.
- Don't expect your fatigue to be greatly alleviated by medical treatment.
- Bear in mind that the syndromes of post-viral fatigue tend to be self-limiting and will eventually get better.
- Look at remedies, including homeopathic and nutritional supplements, that are known to strengthen the immune system.
- Post-viral fatigue is **very** common, and **NOT** life threatening!

PERSONAL

- Patience and a determination to be constructive and positive in your attitudes will be key factors in ensuring that feelings of frustration and despondency are kept under control.
- The crucial issue in the effective management of fatigue is accepting that your reserves of mental/emotional/physical energy need to be carefully monitored and husbanded.
- It's important to identify any situations likely to cause stress and trigger off anxiety, so that you can learn to preempt their occurrence. With low energy levels you may be vulnerable to the slightest stress.
- Since your levels of energy will fluctuate, it's advisable to guard against doing too much during periods of apparent normality, when you will be tempted to catch up on lost time. Such efforts are likely to pitch you back very rapidly into a state of over-tiredness.
- Frequent breaks and weekends away from university will enable you periodically to recharge your batteries, and maintain a sense of perspective.
- When energy levels are low, find activities which require near zero concentration. Above all don't waste time in introspective self-criticism and analysis: it's counter-productive, and will serve only to sap your meager resources even further.
- An effective method of controlling your fatigue is to become aware of the underlying ways in which your energy gets depleted. Keep a detailed diary, using a diary. At the end of each day, put down how your feelings fluctuated (alert, tired, depressed etc) and what you have achieved. Over a period of weeks, this kind of record will enable you to manage your tiredness on a more predictable basis.
- Everything in moderation! Try to steer clear of violent exercise, long journeys, late nights, etc. You may end up with a slightly 'grey' existence, but at least you won't jeopardize the process of recovery.