

## ■ Introduction

There are no definitive tests for chronic fatigue but the primary symptoms are as follows:

- a** Fatigue is the principle symptom.
- b** It has a definite onset.
- c** It has been present for a minimum of six months and for more than 50 per cent of the time
- d** Other symptoms may be present such as muscle or joint pain, poor sleep, mood disturbances, headache, dizziness, sore throat, difficulty concentrating and memory problems.

It is a simplistic mistake to think in terms of either physical or mental causes of fatigue as both are closely intertwined. We know that there is a very close relationship between the brain and the immune system and the way a person thinks and behaves certainly seems to influence the effects of fatigue. A number of factors have been linked with causing fatigue which are as follows:

- a** Failure to get over viral illness (two-thirds of cases attribute fatigue to a viral trigger).
- b** Stress and busy lifestyle.
- c** Perfectionistic, achieving personality traits.

Fatigue syndrome is often characterised by the person either doing too much or doing too little physical activity. There seems to be a see-saw or yo-yo affect on activity levels where one day the person might do too much and the next day they would do too little. Doing less may help in the short term but in the long term inactivity makes you feel more exhausted and lethargic. Inactivity leads to loss of drive and determination, reduces your level of physical fitness and muscular strength, and effects the quality of your sleep. Patients who take to their beds lose 10 per cent of the power in their muscles in the first week.

## ■ How to overcome chronic fatigue

- 1** Gradually increase your activity levels. Set yourself a programme of gradually increasing activities starting with least difficult tasks and gradually, slowly, build up to more difficult tasks. Undertake activity for short periods of time – ‘little and often’ eg, 5 × 5 minutes a day rather than 25 minutes together. Balance activities that are enjoyable with activities that are not so enjoyable. Keep a diary or record sheet so that you can notice progress.
- 2** Pace yourself. Avoid ‘bursts’ of activity followed by periods of exhaustion and rest.
- 3** Follow a regular sleep pattern – 80 per cent of people with chronic fatigue have sleeping difficulties as they either sleep too much, or are not able to sleep through the night. Try to follow a regular sleep pattern, get up and go to bed at regular times and do not catnap during the day.
- 4** Challenge distorted ‘all or nothing’, or ‘catastrophic’ thinking which may adversely effect your behaviour. For example you may say to yourself, ‘I’m making myself ill’, or ‘I should try harder’, or ‘I’ll be wiped out for a couple of weeks now’. Write down your negative thoughts on a diary sheet and challenge those thoughts.
- 5** Distract yourself from becoming over sensitised to your bodily symptoms. Very often people become so aware of bodily symptoms of fatigue or muscle pain that this makes them worse. The more you think about a particular symptom the worse it is likely to get.
- 6** Improve your diet. Eat a healthy balanced diet, three times a day, avoid drinking alcohol, and eliminate smoking as both increase level of fatigue.
- 7** Expect setbacks and relapses as they are a normal part of progress – do not let them demoralise you.