

Yet another virus: chronic fatigue syndrome

Chronic fatigue syndrome could change the face of the American work force because it zeroes in on a particular class of people

BY DORIS WISHER

At 32, you're a college-educated woman and a hard-driving executive moving up in a fast-track career.

One morning you can't lift your head off your pillow, and your life takes on a new dimension. Usually you bound out of bed to be the first at your office. Now your throat is sore and you try unsuccessfully to ignore your dizziness. You even stay home from work to recuperate, but

Health

you're so disgusted with not feeling top-notch that it's a wasted day of lying on the couch staring absentmindedly at magazines. Maybe it's just a touch of mono, what with working 10 to 14 hours a day, six days a week.

Within six months you lose your high-stress job — and your medical coverage — due to absenteeism, yet your doctor says nothing's wrong. Your friends abandon you and your complaints, and your savings dwindle. The thought of facing a welfare worker would infuriate you if you weren't already so tired.

Approximately 100,000 cases of chronic Epstein-Barr virus, which the Centers for Disease Control recently designated chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), have been reported in North America. CFS could change the face of the American work force because it zeroes in on a particular class of people. Hailed as the malaise of the '80s and the yuppie flu, this herpes-family virus may last a few days or a lifetime.

The oddity of this disease is that it centers on lingering symptoms, including low-grade fever, aching joints, sore throat, mental confusion, deep depression, and most of all, profound fatigue in a class of active go-getters who have everything to lose by being sick. A malingerer cannot survive five minutes on the fast-track. So, when doctors tell a complaining patient, "It's all in your head" because blood tests reveal nothing, and "You're tired because you're depressed: see a psychiatrist," sufferers seek doctor after doctor until a "real" diagnosis is made.

To make matters worse, they don't have a cold, yet their nagging sore throat persists. They test negative for HIV yet are as exhausted as someone with AIDS. They don't have Alzheimer's, yet they're as forgetful as their beloved

grandmother. They have no basis for a clinical depression diagnosis, yet they can be suicidal.

Demographically, CFS is a stunner because it can and probably will alter the work force. Sufferers range from 25 to 45 years of age, with the majority in their 30s. The virus debilitates women three-to-one over men and usually attacks educated professionals — the working class with mortgages and comprehensive medical coverage — until they lose their jobs to illness.

CFS seems to have spared some folks: blue-collar workers, the elderly and children, who possibly are less stressed. That the virus touches only a class within the current generation is remarkable.

The disease is not fatal like AIDS or leukemia, but the virus is capable of destroying the productive experience of living. Across the nation newspapers and magazines print countless first-person narratives of syndrome victims. The sufferer once thrived on clear goals and work schedules. Planning and strategizing once determined the crispness of the final business report, the camera-ready copy and the sales proposal. Now they fumble around in a fog, too tired to do anything physical. CFS is a spirit-killing and soul-deadening for people accustomed to making their own decisions and controlling their lives.

Gidget Faubion, founder of the national Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Society, said, "We suggest patients get eight hours sleep and make a major lifestyle change. That means get as much stress out of your life as possible, eat low salt, low sugar and no caffeine, chocolate, Nutra-sweet, and foods with preservatives and dyes."

Doctors estimate that 90 percent of the world's population has been exposed to the virus by age 30, but not everyone develops CFS, depending on whether or not their immune system has been damaged. There is presently not an antiviral medication for the disease.

Yet Faubion is optimistic. "We've come a long way since 1985, and now we're on the leading edge here in Portland. Chronic fatigue syndrome is a multisystem disease, and we now have multisystem testing to rule out other diseases before making the real diagnosis. Science and technology have finally caught up with the virus," she said.

For more information about CFS, send a long, self-addressed, stamped envelope to Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Society, PO Box 230108, Portland, OR 97223.



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Kristine L. Falco, Psy.D.
Psychological Resident
Supervisor Jean A. Furchner, Ph.D.

654-9866 Milwaukie, Oregon

Frank J. Dixon



DIXON & FRIEDMAN
Attorneys at Law
1020 S.W. Taylor
Suite 430
Portland, OR 97205
242-1440

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