

## CFIDS: A List of Symptoms by David S. Bell, M.D.

### CFIDS Symptoms

The nonspecific nature of the name CFIDS is appropriate because while there are many symptoms, disabling fatigue and exhaustion are the most prominent and consistent. However, fatigue, probably the most universal symptom, is the most severe symptom in only half of the patients. The rest have either headaches, muscle pain, joint pain, visual disturbances, emotional changes, memory loss, confusion, lymph node pain, or abdominal pain as the most severe symptom. Individual symptoms may vary in intensity, but the pattern of symptoms remains remarkably constant. These symptoms can be completely disabling and may persist for years, or they may be minor to the degree of being no more than a nuisance.

In general, the physical examination shows only subtle abnormalities, such as throat inflammation or muscle and lymph node tenderness. It is truly remarkable that a patient can feel so bad yet look relatively well. The routine laboratory evaluation, like the physical examination, shows only minimal, if any, abnormalities. Although sophisticated laboratory testing may reveal abnormal results, they are difficult for most physicians to interpret and have been largely ignored. The combination of numerous severe somatic complaints and only minor abnormalities on physical exam and routine laboratory testing is the reason many physicians have dismissed this illness as hypochondriasis. In the past fifty years, the emphasis in medicine has been to divide illnesses into categories by the nature of the symptoms. Therefore, a joint specialist would see CFIDS as a form of arthritis, a psychiatrist would see it as mental illness, and an allergist would see it as a manifestation of allergies. It is ironic that in this day of specialists, the generalists have been the only group of physicians able to recognize the spectrum of symptoms in CFIDS as a specific syndrome. But in our era of technology, it is rare for specialists to listen to generalists.

And specialists have been unable to make much progress in studying this illness, primarily because of the lack of "disease" in the organs in which they specialize. That is to say, although the muscles hurt, muscle biopsies are normal or show minimal changes only. Although there are headaches, CT scans of the brain are normal. Specialists are interested in diseases originating in their area of specialty. In these days of specialty medicine, a patient with CFIDS might see more than ten different specialists, and none will be able to find the cause of the complaints. In CFIDS, whatever causes the symptoms is outside of the limited specialties. We are witnessing a disease so fundamental in its origin that it affects all body systems but causes little damage.

Following is a list of the myriad symptoms seen in CFIDS, including a rough estimate of the percentage of patients who would have each symptom. Those symptoms that cause patients the greatest discomfort are asterisked (\*).

Fatigue or exhaustion	95 % *
Headache	90 % *
Malaise	80 % *
Short-term memory loss	80 % *
Muscle pain	75 % *
Difficulty concentrating	70 % *
Joint pain	65 % *
Depression	65 % *
Abdominal pain	60 % *
Lymph node pain	50 % *
Sore throat	50 % *
Lack of restful sleep	90 % *
Muscle weakness	30 %
Bitter or metallic taste	25 %

Balance disturbance	30 %
Diarrhea	50 %
Constipation	40 %
Bloating	60 %
Panic attacks	30 %
Eye pain	30 %
Scratchiness in eyes	60 %
Blurring of vision	80 %
Double vision	10 %
Sensitivity to bright lights	80 %
Numbness and/or tingling in extremities	60 %
Fainting spells	40 %
Light-headedness	75 %
Dizziness	30 %
Clumsiness	30 %
Insomnia	65 %
Fever or sensation of fever	85 %
Chills	30 %
Night sweats	50 %
Weight gain	40 %
Allergies	60 %
Chemical sensitivities	25 %
Palpitations	55 %
Shortness of breath	30 %
Flushing rash of the face and cheeks	40 %
Swelling of the extremities or eyelids	20 %
Burning on urination	20 %
Sexual dysfunction	20 %
Hair loss	20 %

A list of CFIDS symptoms is misleading. At first glance it appears that almost every symptom possible is part of the list. This is another reason many physicians have not accepted the reality of CFIDS-there are simply too many symptoms. But a patient relating these symptoms does not list them in a random manner. They fit a precise pattern that is nearly identical from one patient to the next. The pattern of symptoms is so reproducible in the usual case that patients are able to diagnose CFIDS in others in an instant.

---

(From the book by David S. Bell, M.D., *The Disease of a Thousand Names* [Lyndonville, Pollard Publications, 1991].  
Reproduced here with the permission of the author. )

**[Webmaster's Note: In the United States, the term CFIDS (*Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome*) is used interchangeably with CFS (*Chronic Fatigue Syndrome*).]**