

## CHRONIC FATIGUE SYNDROME

Chronic fatigue syndrome refers to a constant or periodic fatigue which present for at least 6 months in the absence of obvious causes. This fatigue prevents the person carrying out their duties. Along with fatigue the person may have other symptoms including sore throat, muscle weakness or pain, headaches, aches in the joints, memory and concentration problems and disturbed sleep.

A mild temperature and tender nodes in the neck can also be present. Chronic fatigue syndrome can start suddenly following an infective illness or can have a gradual onset.

### *Tiredness, Fatigue & Sleepiness*

The distinction between fatigue, tiredness and sleepiness is not always clear. Often people use the terms tiredness and fatigue meaning a combination of all three. Sleepiness is regarded as a consequence of being tired and fatigued. Disturbance of sleep is very common in people with chronic fatigue syndrome being reported in up to 71%.

It is in our experience that a group of people with chronic fatigue syndrome have an abnormality similar to people with narcolepsy. This particularly applies to people in whom chronic fatigue syndrome is severe. Some of these people respond well to small doses of stimulant medication.

## OTHER CAUSES OF DAYTIME SLEEPINESS AND TIREDNESS

There are many *medical conditions* which can cause daytime tiredness and sleepiness. Iron deficiency, vitamin deficiency, lack of thyroid and other hormones, severe heart failure, liver failure and virtually any chronic debilitating condition are some examples.

*Emotional problems* such as depression, can be associated with daytime tiredness, fatigue and sometimes sleepiness. The use of medications to treat depression can be responsible for a sleepiness and lack of energy during the day.

Virtually anything which disrupts the continuity of sleep brings about daytime sleepiness and tiredness. Sleep apnoea, for example, is a common condition. *Shift working* is also associated with chronic lack of sleep as well as daytime tiredness.

Once these groups have been excluded there is still a group of people who complain of severe tiredness and sleepiness. These people show an abnormality of the sleep and wake cycle.

## Chronic Fatigue



## Narcolepsy ~ falling asleep ~

Newcastle Sleep Disorders Centre

Division of the Respiratory Medicine Unit

Hunter New England

(02) 49223150

Level 2

John Hunter Hospital

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/md/sleep/>

# *Narcolepsy*

Often people with narcolepsy are not diagnosed for a long time. Some are labelled as lazy or a sleepy head. If the condition started in childhood they may have had difficulty learning and then difficulty keeping a job. Patients with narcolepsy often have a history of car accidents as well as an increased risk of work related accidents. There is usually a long history of symptoms going back many years. Some people manage to put in place coping mechanisms. They try, for example, to take a nap as soon as an opportunity arises such as lunch break or while sitting as a passenger in a vehicle.

## *Age of onset*

The symptoms of narcolepsy can start at any age, however, they usually start around teenage years and 40's-50's. The condition usually persists all through life.

## *Sleepiness/tiredness in narcolepsy*

Some patients with narcolepsy have an irresistible need to fall asleep. The patient falls asleep for 10-20 minutes and then is able to resume their activities to full capacity. This may be repeated many times through the day. In other people, however, the feeling is more one of drowsiness during which the patient can fall asleep at any time if given the opportunity. This often happens if the patient is engaged in boring activities such as driving, reading or watching television. Some people describe their feeling as a thick fog hanging over their head which they are unable to shake off. Some of these people can nap for 1-2 hours and still wake up unrefreshed.

# *Other Symptoms of Narcolepsy*

## **1. Cataplexy**

**The word cataplexy refers to the sudden loss of power in any muscle group in the body. It can occur particularly during strong emotions like laughing or if a person becomes angry. Cataplexy is sometimes described as a “jelly-like feeling” going through the body which can last from half a second to a few seconds. It becomes particularly obvious if it involves the leg muscles in which case the person has a feeling of buckling at the knees or ankles. Some people may even fall to the ground. Although a person suffering from cataplexy may not be able to move for a few seconds they are still conscious.**

## **2. Sleep paralysis**

***Sleep paralysis* is also a symptom of narcolepsy. This occurs usually when the person is going to sleep or waking up. The person is awake but has the feeling of being unable to move. This paralysis tends to end on its own after a few seconds, or can be stopped if someone else touches the person.**

## **3. Hypnagogic hallucinations**

**A hypnagogic hallucination is a dream which occurs when a person is half awake; just when a person is falling asleep there may be vivid, brightly coloured hallucinations. The abnormal feeling can be visual or auditory (hearing voices or noises) or even a feeling of abnormal body positions.**

**A person with narcolepsy can have *one or more* of the above symptoms.**

**The person may need no treatment at all if the symptoms are mild and they do not work in a high risk occupation.**

**Regular naps through the day are a possible option which usually tends to improve sleepiness through the day. If this is not possible or if it is not enough, treatment with stimulant medications usually provides good symptomatic relief.**

**There are two medications available in Australia, Ritalin and Dexamphetamine. These medications are amphetamine-like medications and require special approval for their prescription.**

## *Treatment of Narcolepsy*