

Research showing ME is a physical disease

Dundee University Studies co-funded by
The Young ME Sufferers Trust and ME Research UK

BBC World Service Interview

Scientists in Scotland have found new evidence that ME, or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome could be caused by a virus. They studied children affected and found abnormalities in their blood which they say points to an infection. It's reckoned that millions of people, mainly in the developed world, have ME; many of them are children. Jill Belch [pictured], who's Professor of Vascular Medicine at Dundee University, led the research:

'There are two important things that we've found, and the first is that there's an abnormal level of an inflammatory chemical in the blood, and this is matched by abnormal white blood cell behaviour, and that's important because finding an abnormality is half way to finding a treatment. But the second thing that I think makes these findings important is that it is a physical abnormality, and there has been some question in some people's minds as to

whether this disease might actually be a disease of the mind, and I think finding a physical abnormality reassures us that this is a genuine physical illness.'

Indeed, some doctors have been reluctant to diagnose ME, in the belief that it is a disease of the mind. Jane Colby was a Head Teacher until she was struck down by ME; she's now Executive Director of The Young ME Sufferers Trust here in the UK. First, her reaction to these new findings.

'I welcome it, and frankly it's exactly what I would have expected, because the important thing is, it's not just evidence of infection in children with ME, but persistent infection. So they're fighting something, and they're fighting it on an ongoing basis, which means there's an explanation for why they are so ill for so long.'



Biochemical and Vascular Aspects of Pediatric Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

- We showed for the first time, to our knowledge, that oxidative stress [...] and increased WBC apoptosis occur in children with ME
- The data are also consistent with a reactivating or persistent viral infection

Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med
2010;164(9):817-823

Can the symptoms be different from person to person? Can they be very severe in one case and mild in another?

'Well, like any other illness, yes you're going to get severe cases. The important thing to do is not to let a milder case turn into a severe case, and if you manage it wrongly that's what it will do.'

Physical and Functional Impact of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/Myalgic Encephalomyelitis in Childhood

Key findings with educational implications

- Only 1 child out of 25 was able to attend school full-time (4%)
- 12 children were attending school part-time (48%)
- 8 children received home tuition (32%)

These results are in accord with similar findings for adults, indicating that physical symptoms can be at least as disabling as those of multiple sclerosis and other chronic conditions.

The quality of life of children with CFS/ME was significantly impaired compared with their healthy counterparts and that of children affected by other chronic illnesses (type 1 diabetes mellitus and asthma).

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The Young ME Sufferers Trust
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