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Treating chronic fatigue syndrome

A study into the scientific evidence for pharmacological treatments

Background

Chronic fatigue syndrome, or myalgic encephalomyelitis (CFS), is a severe disabling condition. Patients with CFS usually trial many different medicines, both conventional and complementary. An overview of the pharmacological treatments used by CFS patients and the available evidence underpinning the use of these treatments would be of great value to both patients and their healthcare providers.

Methods

Ninety-four CFS patients recruited into an Australian study investigating immunological biomarkers filled out a questionnaire assessing the medicines they were taking. Evidence from randomised clinical trials was sought in biomedical databases.

Results

The 94 CFS patients used 474 different medicines and supplements. The most commonly used medicines were antidepressants, analgesics, sedatives, and B vitamins. We identified 20 randomised controlled trials studying these medicines in CFS patients.

Conclusion

While conventional and complementary medicines are widely used by CFS patients, the evidence for effectiveness in CFS is very limited.

Keywords: chronic fatigue syndrome; drug therapy; complementary therapies; vitamins

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), also referred to as myalgic encephalomyelitis, is a disabling condition.^{1,2} In addition to fatigue for more than 6 months that is not relieved by sleep and interferes with activities of daily life, patients suffer other symptoms such as cognitive impairment, muscle and joint pains and sore throat.³ The diagnostic criteria for CFS are outlined in *Table 1*.

The aetiology of CFS is still poorly understood, despite extensive research into the possible causes. The most recent consensus document describes how current research indicates the presence of widespread inflammation and multisystem neuropathology as underlying pathophysiological process with dysregulation of the central nervous system, immune system and cellular energy metabolism.⁴ However, an underlying cause for the observed abnormalities is still lacking. This is reflected in the multiple different treatments used by patients, both conventional and complementary and alternative medicines (CAMs).⁵ The financial impact of CFS is considerable. A United States of America study calculated direct medical costs of US\$2342–8675 per patient per year, while indirect costs were estimated to be on average US\$20 000 per patient per year due to loss of income. The inability to work of both patient and carers adds significantly to the financial impact of this disease. This equates to a total cost of at least \$18 billion per year in the USA alone.^{1,6–8}

Patients with CFS often turn to their primary care physician or alternative healthcare provider for advice and support.^{9,10} For example, CFS patients in the United Kingdom were more likely

Table 1. Diagnostic criteria for chronic fatigue syndrome³

- Unexplained, persistent fatigue that is not due to ongoing exertion; is not substantially relieved by rest; is of new onset (not lifelong); and results in a significant reduction in previous levels of activity
- Four or more of the following symptoms are present for 6 months or more:
 - impaired memory or concentration
 - postexertional malaise (extreme, prolonged exhaustion and sickness following physical or mental activity)
 - unrefreshing sleep
 - muscle pain
 - multijoint pain without swelling or redness
 - headaches of a new type or severity
 - sore throat that is frequent or recurring
 - tender cervical or axillary lymph nodes

to have seen a complementary or alternative healthcare provider than a physiotherapist or psychologist in a 6 month timeframe,¹⁰ while graded exercise and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) are recommended first line treatments.^{11,12} Doctors often feel frustrated and powerless as they have very little to offer patients in terms of ‘fixing’ their condition. The recommended treatment modalities at present are CBT and graded exercise, which are not well accepted by patients and unlikely to lead to a full recovery in most patients.¹³

As part of a study into the immunological markers of CFS we explored which pharmacological treatments CFS patients are taking and if these treatments are supported by evidence from clinical trials.

Methods

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from Queensland and New South Wales through CFS support groups and newspaper and email advertisements into a prospective study investigating potential immunological biomarkers for CFS.¹⁴ Patients previously diagnosed with autoimmune disorders, psychosis, epilepsy, heart disease, or who were pregnant or breastfeeding were excluded. All patients met the 1994 CDC criteria for CFS.³

Ethics approval was obtained from the Bond University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Data collection

All patients included in the study in July 2010 filled out a questionnaire that included questions on the current use of medicines and supplements. Medicines or supplements that were not listed as 'registered medicine' with the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration were labelled as CAM and categorised into three groups: vitamins, minerals and supplements.

Literature survey

We systematically searched for evidence from randomised controlled trials (RCTs) for each of the medicine groups used by CFS patients using MEDLINE (PubMed 1960 to June 2010) and the Cochrane Library (until June 2010). We also used bibliographies of review articles identified. We used MeSH headings and keywords including: 'chronic fatigue', 'chronic fatigue syndrome', 'myalgic encephalomyelitis', 'treatment' and 'medication' and repeated the searches for the individual medicines and medicine groups (eg. antidepressant, individual vitamins). We applied limits for study type 'clinical trial'. As we were interested in the evidence for effectiveness of each of the treatments, we searched for RCTs that provide a high level of evidence (Level 2 as graded by the National Health and Medical Research Council [www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/cp30.pdf]). We excluded trials that were not randomised, lacked blinding or without a control group. The methodology of RCTs minimises the risk of known and unknown biases, including the placebo effect, the influence of the characteristics of the treating doctor, patient preferences and disease severity.

Results

Medicine and supplement use

Our study population comprised 94 participants fulfilling the criteria for CFS. Their average age was 47 years (range 20–66 years) and 67 were (71%) women (*Table 2*). They used 474 different medicines and CAMs, including 220 conventional and 254 CAMs with an average of 5.0 per patient (*Table 3*).

The most commonly used conventional medicines were those acting on the central nervous system, including antidepressants (41% of patients) and sedatives (27%). Likewise, analgesics were frequently used, mainly simple analgesics (eg. paracetamol, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs [NSAIDs]), but 13% of patients used opiates (tramadol or oxycodone).

While CAMs included a wide range of medicines, 47% of patients reported the use of some form of B vitamins, 24% used magnesium and 7% were taking a co-enzyme Q10 supplement.

Literature survey

Our search strategy identified 61 studies in PubMed, of which 18 were RCTs investigating one of the treatments used by our participants. The additional two RCTs were found tracking the references of review articles. This resulted in 20 RCTs. Five RCTs involved antidepressants, the most commonly used medicine in our study population. The trials identified and their outcomes are listed in *Table 4*. Only one of these five studies reported a statistically significant improvement in symptoms in CFS patients.¹⁵ However, this effect was only observed in patients who had received 12 weeks of CBT before starting treatment with mirtazepine. Concomitant treatment with mirtazepine and CBT did not result in an additional benefit

compared to placebo. We did not find any RCTs investigating the effect of analgesics in CFS patients. Five trials studied the effect of adrenal gland hormones (eg. fludrocortisone), but benefit was only reported in two of the five studies.¹⁶

A recent Cochrane review¹⁷ assessed the evidence for traditional Chinese herbs in CFS and concluded that none of the available studies was of sufficient methodological quality to be pooled in meta-analysis. While vitamins and minerals were widely used we could not find any RCTs studying CFS patients. One study with magnesium injections reported a significant improvement of symptoms.¹⁸ The positive effects of an essential fatty acid supplement in postviral fatigue¹⁹ found in one trial were not confirmed in a second trial.²⁰

Discussion

Our study into Australian CFS patients shows that they use a wide array of medicines (prescribed and over-the-counter) and CAMs, but strong evidence for effectiveness of any of these treatments is lacking.

Other studies confirm the use of multiple medicines by CFS patients.^{5,10} Patients are desperate to try anything, hoping to find some relief for their disabling symptoms. But polypharmacy often comes at a price – the risk of harm – emphasising the need for clarity about the benefits.²¹ Our study raises several issues, including the limited availability of evidence and equivocal results, concerns for potential harm of polymedication, and the need for patient focused research to advance the search for effective treatments in CFS.

Availability of evidence

The paucity of RCTs evaluating efficacy of pharmacological treatments in CFS patients is

Table 2. Baseline characteristics of the study population comprising 94 chronic fatigue syndrome patients

Age	Mean	SD	Range
Age (years)	46.5	12.2	20–66
Height (cm)	168	17	147–196
Weight (kg)	71.2	14.3	45–120
	N	%	
Female	67	71.3	
Male	27	28.7	

Table 3. Conventional and complementary medicines use in a group of 94 chronic fatigue syndrome patients

Medicine (total 220 for 94 patients)	N*	Number of RCTs	Results
Antidepressants	39	5	Four no effect ^{22–25} One small effect only if preceded by CBT ¹⁵
Simple analgesia (paracetamol, aspirin, NSAIDs)	35	0	
Sedative and hypnotics (benzodiazepines)	25	0	
Opioids	12	0	
Gonadal hormones (eg. hormone therapy, testosterone)	9	0	
Thyroxine	5	0	
Antiviral medicine (eg. valaciclovir)	4	1	No effect ³⁵
Pregabalin	3	0	
Antihistamines	3	1	No effect ³⁶
Adrenal hormones (eg. hydrocortisone/fludrocortisones)	2	5	Three no effect ^{37–39} Two short term effect ^{16,28}
Other [†]	137		
Supplements (total 119)			
Fish oil	19	2	One no effect ²⁰ One effect in postviral fatigue ¹⁹
DHEA	9	0	
Co-enzyme Q10	7	0	
Melatonin	4	1	No effect ⁴⁰
Evening primrose oil	3	1	No effect ²⁰
Homeopathic treatment	2	1	Minor improvement ⁴¹
Ginseng	1	1	No effect ⁴²
Other [†]	74		
Minerals (total 63)			
Magnesium	23	1	Significant effect (intramuscular injection) ¹⁸
Zinc	13	0	
Calcium	12	0	
Iron	5	0	
Other [†]	10		
Vitamins (total 72)			
Vitamin B	44	1	No effect on functional status (injectable bovine liver extract) ⁴³
Multivitamins	18	1	No effect (polynutrient supplement) ⁴⁴
Other [†]	10		

* Number of times used by our study population

† Medicines and supplements used by maximum three patients with no identified trials or used for other indications (eg. statins, blood pressure medicine, asthma inhalers, contraception, eye drops)

striking and in contrast with the widely studied nonpharmacological interventions for this condition.^{11,12} Most published studies identified by our literature search lack control groups, are not randomised or blinded, and thus are at a high risk of bias.

Frequently used analgesics, from simple over-the-counter to restricted prescription only narcotic analgesics have never been studied in head-to-head RCTs in CFS patients. Likewise, we found no trials studying hormonal products, such as gonadal hormones and thyroxine. The paucity of trials with vitamins and mineral or nutritional supplements is perhaps less surprising, but these products are widely used and account for large out-of-pocket expenses. However, the identified lack of evidence is not necessarily also evidence for a lack of effect, and clinical studies investigating the benefit and harm of unlimited and multiple uses of these popular products in chronic conditions such as CFS are urgently needed.

Some treatments reported in our survey have been studied in clinical trials, but the number of trials is small and the results of the available studies are equivocal. For example, we found no convincing evidence for an effect of antidepressants (used by 40% of patients in our survey). Of the five trials identified in our literature search only one study reported a small effect, but only if antidepressant treatment was preceded by CBT.¹⁵ In all other trials no benefit of antidepressants was reported.^{22–25} Interestingly, antidepressants have been shown to improve symptoms in fibromyalgia,²⁶ which has some overlapping symptoms with CFS.²⁷ Unfortunately we did not have information about the indications for the antidepressant medicine. Depression and mood disturbance is common in CFS patients and it is possible that some antidepressants are prescribed for comorbid conditions rather than CFS itself.

The RCT with intramuscular magnesium injections showed a promising result,¹⁸ but the study was only short term (6 weeks) and it is not clear if oral magnesium supplements (taken by our surveyed patients) produce the same benefit, as oral absorption is poor and high doses might cause diarrhoea. The positive effect of adrenal hormones reported in two of the five trials should be regarded in the context of the associated risks

Table 4. Medicines taken and relevant randomised controlled trial

Study	Intervention	Number of participants	Duration of the intervention	Main outcome measures
Vercoulen ²²	Fluoxetine 20 mg	44 depressed CFS patients 52 nondepressed CFS patients	8 weeks	Subjective fatigue scale, self rated fatigue, Beck Depression Inventory, actometer, neuropsychological tests
Wearden ²³	Fluoxetine 20 mg +/- exercise	136 CFS patients	26 weeks	Fatigue questionnaire, SF-36, Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale HADS
Natelson ²⁴	Phenelzine 15 mg	25 CFS patients	4 weeks	Six self rated questionnaires including Functional Status Questionnaire
Stubhaug ¹⁵	Mirtazepine 15–45 mg +/- CBT	72 CFS patients	12–24 weeks (double crossover)	Main outcomes fatigue and global clinical impression, several secondary outcomes
Hickie ²⁵	Moclobemide 450–600 mg	90 CFS patients	6 weeks	Karnofsky Performance Index (investigator rated), patient rated global improvement, profile of mood states, general health questionnaire, immune responsiveness
Lerner ³⁵	IV valaciclovir	19 CFS patients, diagnosed <1 year	6 months	CFS energy index point score, several cardiac outcomes
Steinberg ³⁶	Terfenadine 60 mg bd	30 CFS patients	2 months	Self rated symptom questionnaire
Blockmans ³⁷	5 mg hydrocortisone and 50 µg 9- α -fludrocortisone	100 CFS patients	3 months, crossover	Several questionnaires including self rated fatigue, SF-36, depression questionnaire
Rowe ³⁸	Fludrocortisone acetate 0.1 mg	100 CFS patients with neurally mediated hypotension	9 weeks	Percentage improved at least 15 points on 100 point global impression scale
Petersen ³⁹	Fludrocortisone 0.1–0.2 mg	25 CFS patients	6 weeks	Self rated questionnaires, symptoms severity scales
McKenzie ¹⁶	Hydrocortisone oral, 16 mg/m ²	70 CFS patients	12 weeks	Main: 5 or more point improvement on global wellness scale; secondary: several other scales
Cleare ²⁸	Hydrocortisone 5–10 mg	23 CFS patients	1 month crossover	Self reported fatigue scores
Behan ¹⁹	Essential fatty acids	63 postviral CFS patients	3 months	Doctor with patient assessed overall condition, fatigue, myalgia, dizziness, poor concentration and depression on a 3-point scale
Warren ²⁰	Efol marine (fishoil + evening primrose oil)	50 CFS patients	3 months	Symptoms checklist, Beck depression inventory
Williams ⁴⁰	5 mg melatonin at night	30 CFS patients	12 weeks, crossover	Visual analogue scales, SF-36, health survey, mental fatigue inventory and HADS
Weatherly-Jones ⁴¹	Individualised homeopathic treatment	103 CFS patients	6 months	Primary: multidimensional fatigue inventory; secondary: fatigue impact scale
Hartz ⁴²	Siberian ginseng	96 CFS patients	2 months	Fatigue measures
Cox ¹⁸	IM magnesium	32 CFS patients	6 weeks	Nottingham Health Profile, proportion improved
Kaslow ⁴³	Bovine liver extract containing folic acid and cyanocobalamin	15 CFS patients	Single injection, crossover	Several criteria of functional status
Brouwers ⁴⁴	Polynutrient supplement	53 CFS patients	10 weeks	CIS fatigue score, number of CDC symptoms of CFS and SIP8 score

Results

No differences on any of the outcome measures, including depression

No difference for fluoxetine on fatigue or SF-36; at 13 weeks small difference for depression but not at 26 weeks

No difference on between the treatment and placebo group on any of the individual questionnaires

Only significant difference in group receiving CBT first followed by mirtazepine, not in group with start on mirtazepine followed by CBT

No significant differences for patient or investigator reported outcomes

No statistically significant differences

No significant differences

No significant differences

No significant differences

No significant differences

Greater percentage (53% vs. 29%; $p=0.04$) recording an improvement in wellness score, no significant differences on the other scales

Significant improvements in the hydrocortisone group

87% rated themselves as improved versus 17% taking placebo ($p<0.001$)

No significant differences

No significant differences

No statistically significant differences

No significant differences

80% improved versus 17% in placebo (difference 62%, 95% CI: 35–90)

No significant differences

No significant differences

with long term adrenal gland suppression, which would preclude its use in a chronic condition such as CFS.^{16,28}

The frequent concomitant use of multiple drugs (prescription and over-the-counter) is of concern. Benzodiazepines and opiates, often used together, may ameliorate symptoms such as muscle pain and insomnia on the short term. But both groups of medicines can be addictive and lose effectiveness with long term use. Once started, it is often difficult to wean patients off.

The notion that ‘if it’s natural, it’s safe’ does not always hold true. Several studies have suggested that dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), a steroid precursor, is deficient in CFS patients,^{29,30} but no trials have investigated the effectiveness of DHEA as a treatment for CFS. In Australia, DHEA is available as a natural supplement from healthfood stores, whereas in other countries such as Canada, it is available on prescription only. Dehydroepiandrosterone is not without risks, as it can cause increase in luteinising hormone and oestrogen levels as well as unfavourable changes in lipid profiles;^{31,32} it is listed as a prohibited substance in the world antidoping code (www.wada-ama.org).

The high intake of medicines puts a strain, both financially and emotionally, on CFS patients and their families. Unwillingness to try ‘all treatments available’ might be seen as ‘not wanting to get better’. The severity of symptoms fluctuates in CFS, and temporary improvements might mistakenly be attributed to the treatments used. Therefore, it is important that more evidence from randomised and blinded clinical trials becomes available. As research into effective treatments for CFS still lacks a clear direction and the list of potentially effective treatments is long, other ways of identifying targets for research are needed. A way forward could be making use of patient and prescribing clinician experiences. For example, in Horton’s³³ study patients were asked which doctors had been helpful in managing their condition followed by interviews of the doctors identified aiming to identify the characteristics of the ‘helpful doctor’. In another example, Frost et al³⁴ analysed online patient reported treatment histories and drug evaluations in order to learn about the effect of off-label use of medicines in different medical conditions.

Chronic fatigue syndrome patients and their clinicians have experiences with a large number of pharmacological treatments and often have a clear idea of what works and what doesn’t work for them. Systematically analysing these reports might assist in prioritising the research agenda.

Conclusion

Our study has illustrated the wide range of seemingly unrelated medicines and CAMs taken by CFS patients. The absence of sufficient and unequivocal evidence for effectiveness to underpin use of these medicines provides testimony of the therapeutic no-man’s-land surrounding CFS. Our overview of the limited evidence base for currently popular treatments for CFS may be disappointing to patients, and their doctors. However, knowledge of the evidence base allows us to make informed decisions. Patient focused input is needed to help set priorities for further clinical research that could lead to better guidance for the management of this condition.

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