

28 Medically Unexplained Physical Symptoms

Factsheet for parents and teachers

One in 10 children suffer from physical symptoms for which no medical cause can be found. Common symptoms are headaches, tiredness, sore muscles, sickness, upset stomach, back pains, blurred vision, weakness and food intolerance. In many children, these symptoms can be made worse by worries – most commonly about school, friendships or family.

What are the causes?

Physical illness or injury may be a factor at the beginning, but when no obvious physical explanation can be found, emotional or psychological factors need to be thought about. These problems are more common in children and young people who:

- are feeling stressed, for whatever reason
- are very sensitive to physical symptoms and pains
- are very sensitive to others
- tend to be fussy or perfectionists
- are very anxious and worry more than most
- worry continuously about the symptoms and their effects on everyday activities – this can cause the symptoms to continue, and even get worse
- have a tendency to develop mental health problems, such as anxiety or depressive disorders.

Unexplained physical symptoms may be part of psychiatric disorders, such as depression or anxiety.

<http://www.trippin.co.nz>

What are the effects of unexplained symptoms?

Everyday life can become very uncomfortable and stressful for these children. Unexplained symptoms can also be very worrying for parents.

Most children learn to cope with these symptoms. But for some, the symptoms may result in:

- missing a lot of school; they may not achieve what they should academically
- seeing less of their friends – this means fewer interests, hobbies and fun
- being less mature and independent than other children because of their dependence on the family.

Who can help?

Your general practitioner or public health nurse will be able to assess your child and help decide if any specialist investigation or treatment is required. If necessary, they will refer your child to the local paediatrician or child and adolescent mental health service.

Specialists within child and adolescent mental health services can help to distinguish unexplained physical symptoms from mental health problems such as depression or anxiety. Child and adolescent mental health services can also help identify psychological factors that may be contributing to the symptoms. Because depression, anxiety and other mental health problems can often produce very unpleasant physical symptoms, a specialist may advise a trial of treatment for these conditions even when mental health conditions do not appear to be an obvious contributor on the face of it - (the results of such treatments in these conditions are sometimes dramatically gratifying).

Talking treatments can help the family to cope with these problems. Medication may also play a part, particularly in overcoming anxiety and depression, or in dealing with eating or sleep problems. Relaxation exercises can be very helpful with recurrent headaches.

A planned approach

Psychiatric help can also be helpful in developing a planned approach to the problem. For it to be effective, everyone needs to work together as a team towards the same goals: you, your child, the paediatrician, psychiatrist, general practitioner and school may all need to get involved.

If no cause can be identified and no direct treatment of the symptom relieves it, management focuses on maintaining or recovering family, social and learning function by developing effective ways of coping with the symptoms and getting back to a normal daily routine. This is best done with active participation from the family. It will involve:

- finding ways of paying less attention to the symptoms

- small but steady increases in everyday and social activities
- the child will be encouraged to do more for themselves and to regain their confidence and independence
- asking teachers to help with looking at ways of overcoming any school or education problems.

Carers of children with unexplained physical symptoms can suffer a lot of stress. Family life may become dominated by the child's problem. Parents will need to be caring, but also determined and positive even when things seem bleak and uncertain. Often parents find it hard to know what to do for the best – when to encourage and when to comfort, when to insist and when to take the pressure off. They may benefit from expert help and advice about this.

Family or individual counselling may be helpful if focused on issues such as how to:

- respond to pain and other symptoms more effectively
- increase levels of physical and social activity
- overcome depression, anxiety, lack of confidence and poor motivation
- deal with family relationship difficulties when these become part of the problem.

Specialist treatment of any depression and/or anxiety arising from the situation can significantly reduce the degree of consequent disability.

It can be helpful for everyone involved in helping the child to meet and review progress from time to time. This allows everyone to share their ideas about the best ways forward – physical, psychological and educational.

ACKNOWLEDGE:

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