

MEDICINE

Study: Chronic fatigue may be linked to virus

By DENISE GRADY
The New York Times

Could a virus be the cause of chronic fatigue syndrome?

A study published last week in the journal *Science* suggested that might be the case, reporting that many patients who had the syndrome were infected with a recently discovered virus.

Chronic fatigue syndrome has long been a medical mystery and the subject of debate, sometimes bitter, among doctors, researchers and patients. It affects at least 1 million Americans, causing extreme fatigue, muscle and joint pain, sleep problems, difficulty concentrating and other symptoms. Its cause is unknown, symptoms can last for years and there is no effective treatment. Researchers disagree about whether it is one disease or a collection of symptoms that may have different causes in different patients.

It has sometimes been stigmatized as more mental than physical, with patients labeled neurotic, depressed or hypochondriacal.

The new report has intrigued scientists, been seen as vindication by some patients and inspired hope for a treatment.

But the new study is not conclusive, and a great deal of work remains to be done to find out whether the new virus really does play a role. Just detecting it in patients does not prove that it is what made them sick; people with the syndrome may have some other underlying problem that makes them susceptible to the virus, which could be just a passenger in their cells.

Even so, thousands of patients have contacted scientists, asking to be tested, said Dr. Judy Mikovits, the first author of the study and the research director at the Whittemore Peterson Institute in Reno, Nev., a research center created by the parents of a woman who has the syndrome.

Mikovits said she expects a test to become available "within weeks."

The new suspect is a xenotropic murine leukemia virus-related virus, which probably descended from a group of viruses that cause cancer in mice. How or when the virus found its way into humans is unknown.

But it has also been linked to cancer in people.

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Thu, May 7, 2020