

The 'fake' illnesses that women report are not phony — they're painful

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by Lisa Fogarty



Countless women are living with pain that doctors won't diagnose

Invisible diseases or illnesses are very real and not just inside the minds of those who live with them. In recent years, doctors have diagnosed both men and women with these conditions, which are also known as medically unexplained symptoms, chronic functional syndromes or psychophysiological disorders (PPD). Typically, the symptoms are the result of chronic stress that activates normal nerve pathways, says Dr. David Clarke, president of [Psychophysiological Disorders Association](#). Common symptoms include lumbar (low) back pain, headache, irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia and pelvic pain, but many other symptoms can result from this process, he adds.

And it's no surprise that women report suffering from these symptoms more often than men. Why?

"A woman needs to be able to carry a baby to term without rejecting it (a man's immune system would reject it immediately as a foreign creature), a woman's immune system is different than a man's," says [Dr. Jacob Teitelbaum](#), founder of the Practitioners Alliance Network and author of several books, including *The Fatigue and Fibromyalgia Solution*. "Because of this, women are more prone to immune conditions, including rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, lupus and fibromyalgia. Unfortunately, our health care system still tends to marginalize women's illnesses that are poorly understood. To put this in perspective historically: About a century ago, multiple sclerosis used to be called hysterical paralysis. Fifty years ago, rheumatoid arthritis was still considered a psychological disorder. Thirty-five years ago, lupus went from being a disease of neurotic women to being real. Fibromyalgia is now going through the same change."

Unfortunately, Teitelbaum says some physicians still have the bad habit of saying, "I don't know what's wrong with you, so you must be crazy," instead of, "I don't know what's wrong with you. I'm sorry. Let's find someone who does."

"Treating women like they are neurotic because the doctor is clueless is simply abusive and not acceptable," Teitelbaum says. "If your physician does this, I recommend you stand up, look them in the eye, give them a big hug, and tell them, 'Thank you for letting me know right off what a complete fool you are so I don't waste my time with you,' and walk out the door."

Here are five invisible illnesses that women shouldn't be made to feel are anything less than real.

1. Vaginismus

This condition causes spasms and contractions of the vagina when faced with physical contact or pressure – and anything from sexual penetration to the insertion of a tampon or even gentle pressure can bring it on, says Sarah Lisovich, senior editor and content strategist at [CIA Medical](#). "This may constitute as invisible because it is felt as an internal burning, tearing or otherwise painful sensation," Lisovich says. "This invisible disease is more common than people suspect and should be taken seriously and with care."

2. Irritable bowel syndrome

IBS, defined as "recurrent abdominal pain or discomfort that occurs in association with altered bowel habits over a period of three months," is far more common than you may think, says Dr. Sherry Ross, OB-GYN and women's health expert at [Providence Saint John's Health Center](#) in Santa Monica, California. A patient may experience constipation, diarrhea or both, and the road to a diagnosis can be long and frustrating.

Ross named other problems that may look like IBS:

- colitis (inflammatory bowel disease, such as Crohn's disease)
- ulcerative colitis
- lactose and fructose intolerance
- pancreatitis
- endometriosis
- celiac disease
- colon cancer
- anxiety disorder
- giardiasis parasite infection
- thyroid dysfunction
- food allergies and side effects from medication, to name a few

"The diagnosis of IBS is mainly discovered through a detailed history of symptoms and bowel habits. There is not one specific test. But with good history taking and a conscientious doctor, IBS can be diagnosed confidently," says Ross.

Although IBS can't be cured, its symptoms can be treated by following a healthy lifestyle and good diet that includes adding fiber and eating frequent small meals.

3. Vulvodynia

This condition is defined as a [chronic pain the vulva region](#) that doesn't have an identifiable cause. The pain can vary from woman to woman and has been described using phrases that range from "acid being poured on the skin" to "knife-like pain." Some women experience pain in specific areas while others feel it in multiple parts of the outside of the vagina. Tara Langdale-Schmidt, who suffered from the condition and is now a national expert and advocate for awareness, is the force behind [VuVa](#), where you can learn more about vulvodynia and treatments.

4. Fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome

Fibromyalgia, which is widespread muscle pain and tenderness, and chronic fatigue syndrome, which is exhaustion that lasts more than six months and doesn't improve with rest, are overlapping conditions that represent a severe energy crisis, Teitelbaum says. "When it becomes especially severe, the person essentially trips a circuit breaker in the brain called the hypothalamus," he says. "The circuit controls sleep, so the person has severe insomnia. In addition, this circuit breaker controls the entire hormonal system, causing a staggering array of symptoms caused by thyroid, adrenal and ovarian deficiency. The immune system also needs a lot of energy and malfunctions, resulting in chronic infections."

Teitelbaum says we've created the "perfect storm" for a human energy crisis. "The pace of modern life has increased dramatically, and sleep has dropped 30 percent from an average nine hours a night to six and a half hours," he says. "In addition, more than 50 percent of the vitamins, minerals and other key nutrients — except for calories — have been lost in food processing. There are also more than 85,000 chemicals now added to the environment, which stresses our immune system and also disrupts hormonal function."

And when it comes to women, Teitelbaum points out yet another reason why these energy crisis illnesses are a big problem. "A woman is now expected to do a full-time job outside of the home, as well as be a mother and homemaker, which is also full-time job," he says. "It is not OK to work 80 hours a week and get credit for 40. Do this for a prolonged period, and you're likely to blow a fuse."

Teitelbaum says published research shows that the SHINE protocol (which optimizes energy by treating sleep, hormones, infections, nutrition and exercise) works to improve the quality of life for someone with fibromyalgia and CFS by 90 percent after three months. For more information about this treatment, visit [Vitality 101](#).

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