

Medically Unexplained Physical Symptoms

Information and advice for parents, carers and anyone who works with young people

Paediatrics

This leaflet looks at why some young people suffer from problematic physical symptoms when there seems to be no physical cause. It also offers advice about how to recognise and manage these problems.

What are medically unexplained physical symptoms?

Medically unexplained physical symptoms (MUPS) are when someone suffers from physical symptoms for which no underlying physical cause can be found.

About 1 in 10 children and adolescents suffer from this condition. Common symptoms are headaches, stomach aches, joint pains and tiredness. Less commonly, young people can have significant unexplained physical symptoms, including muscle weakness, collapses, 'fit-like' episodes as well as severe and chronic pain.

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 problems need to be thought about.

These problems are more common in children and young people who:

- Are feeling stressed, for instance about moving schools, friendship problems or not managing school work
- Are very sensitive to physical symptoms and pain
- Are very sensitive to others
- Have low self-esteem
- Tend to be fussy or perfectionistic
- 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

Unexplained physical symptoms may also be part of another condition, such as depression or anxiety. There may also be a family history of unexplained physical symptoms.

What are the effects of unexplained physical symptoms?

For most children and young people, with appropriate reassurance, the symptoms are short-lived. However for some, everyday life can become very uncomfortable and stressful. Unexplained physical symptoms can also be very worrying for parents.

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The symptoms may result in children and young people:

- Missing a lot of school; they may not achieve what they should socially and academically
- Seeing less of their friends – this means fewer interests, hobbies and fun
- Becoming anxious and depressed
- Being less independent than other young people their age.

Who can help?

Your GP will be able to assess your child and help decide if any specialist investigation or treatment is needed. If necessary, they will refer your child to the local paediatrician or child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS).

Specialists such as psychologists and psychiatrists can help identify the psychological factors that may be contributing to the symptoms, and can also help to distinguish unexplained physical symptoms from other mental health problems, such as depression.

Treatments which involve talking to your child can help them manage unexplained physical symptoms better. Medication can also play a part, particularly in treating any anxiety and depression that they may also be suffering from.

Physiotherapists can also help by setting goals and a focus. Physiotherapy can help to improve symptoms and increase physical function.

How is it treated?

The aim of the treatment is to help your child to recover gradually by creating more effective ways of coping with the symptoms, and getting back to a normal daily routine.

Everyone needs to work together as a team towards the same goals: you, your child, paediatrician, psychologist, physiotherapist, psychiatrist, GP and school may all need to get involved.

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

For the most severe unexplained physical symptoms, specialist help through CAMHS can be helpful in developing a planned approach to the problem.

Caring for a young person with unexplained physical symptoms can be very stressful. Family life can become dominated by your child's difficulties. Parents will need to be caring, but also determined and positive even when things seem bleak and uncertain.

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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. You may benefit from expert help and advice about this. Treatment is best done with active participation from the family. It will involve:

- Finding ways of paying less attention to the symptoms
- A small, but steady, increase in everyday and social activities
- The young person being 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.

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
- Manage depression, anxiety, lack of confidence and poor motivation
- Deal with family relationship difficulties when these become part of the problem.

Further information

This leaflet is one in a series of leaflets produced by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, called 'Mental Health and Growing Up'. The aims of these leaflets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. You can download these leaflets from www.rpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfo/mentalhealthandgrowingup

ChildLine

A free and confidential telephone service for children

Helpline: 0800 11 11 (open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Mental Health Foundation

A charity involved in improving the lives of those with mental health problems or learning disabilities.

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

YoungMinds

For information and advice on child mental health issues.

www.youngminds.org.uk

Parents' helpline: 0800 802 5544 (Monday – Friday, 9.30am – 4pm)

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References

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If you would like to suggest any amendments or improvements to this leaflet please contact the communications department on 0121 507 5495 or email: swb-tr.swbh-gm-patient-information@nhs.net



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