



Brief History of Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME)

Over the last few decades, the information for myalgic encephalomyelitis, mostly known in the US as chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), would have you believe it is a new illness. Despite popular belief, it has been around longer than assumed. The occurrences are not new.

In 1955, Dr. A. Melvin Ramsay described this disease as a mixture of a broad array of neurological and muscular symptoms that can occur after an infectious illness, and which have a characteristically chronic remitting and relapsing course.

Several descriptions of illnesses resembling those of ME have been reported over the years. Two incidents, one at Los Angeles (1934) and another in London at the Royal Free Hospital (1955), are the most well known and publicized.

Myalgic encephalomyelitis was not officially recognized until additional outbreak epidemics occurred in the 1950's through the 1980's in Denmark, the United States, South Africa, and Australia to name a few.

- **1934** The **Los Angeles** County Hospital outbreak attracted particular attention as it was the first ever recorded outbreak of the condition. The outbreak included most of its 200 nurses and doctors. Dr. Alexander Gilliam called the outbreak “atypical poliomyelitis.”
- **1948** An epidemic occurred in **Akureyri, Iceland**, which “simulated poliomyelitis.” It was called “Akureyri disease” and later called “Iceland disease.”
- **1949 - 1951** In **Adelaide, Australia**, 800 people became ill with a disease “resembling poliomyelitis.”
- **1955** Perhaps the best known incidence on a large scale, was the Royal Free Hospital outbreak in **London**. Almost 300 members of the staff were taken ill, of which 250 had to be hospitalized.
- **1984** The illness gained national attention in the United States due to the **Lake Tahoe, Nevada** and **Lyndonville, New York epidemics**.

Myalgic encephalomyelitis is a clearly distinguishable disease entity, though similar in many clinical aspects to nonparalytic poliomyelitis. Myalgic encephalomyelitis imparts a clearer clinical description than many of the names used previously or invented subsequently. The failure to agree on firm diagnostic criteria and the various names/name changes share the common disadvantage of obscuring the worldwide incidence, trivializing the clinical severity of the illness, and making it impossible to obtain funding and research. As a result, there is no specific treatment or cure for 1 million men, women, and children in the United States and 17 million worldwide.

MEadvocacy promotes using the name myalgic encephalomyelitis and the International Consensus Criteria and/or the Canadian Consensus Criteria for ME.

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