

How to cope with medically unexplained symptoms

What are medically unexplained symptoms?

You may have pain or other symptoms that have no known cause. The doctor has not found any illness or medical reason for the symptoms, so they are called “medically unexplained”.

Here are some unexplained symptoms that are common in teens:

- headaches
- stomach upset or pain
- pain in the chest, back or legs
- feeling tired, dizzy or weak
- spells that look like seizures

Medically unexplained symptoms are also called:

- **MUS**
- **somatic symptoms**
- **functional symptoms**

You may have one or more of these symptoms. Although the cause isn't known, **your symptoms are real** and can be very distressing. We understand that you are not imagining or “making up” these symptoms.

Should the doctor keep looking for the cause of these symptoms?

Not usually. In most cases more tests won't uncover anything new. They may, however, cause you more anxiety and stress. Unnecessary tests may make you think: “There must be something very wrong with me, or they wouldn't keep doing all these tests!”

What is known about MUS?

Medical research is underway to help us better understand medical unexplained symptoms (MUS). It may be that the brain interprets signals from nerves in the body as pain or other warning signs, when nothing damaging is going on. Some people are more sensitive or aware of these “false signals” than others. It is also possible that emotional stress contributes to developing symptoms.

Does this mean I have too much stress?

Not necessarily. All teens have some worry and stress. This is a normal part of growing up, and may be a reaction to:

- changes in your body
- changes in your peer group
- more responsibility at school and at home

Reactions to stress vary. When you feel worried or stressed, you may:

- have a racing heart, flushed cheeks or sweaty palms
- have stomach aches, headaches, chest pain or dizziness
- not have any signs of distress at all

The link between MUS and stress isn’t always clear. So it is important for the doctor to ask about your emotions as part of a complete health check-up.

How will MUS affect me?

Many teens with MUS live normally. They continue to see friends, go to school and remain active. But for some teens, the symptoms can have a serious affect on their well-being. They may spend less time with friends, stop going to school or taking part in activities they once enjoyed.

If you stop your usual activities because of symptoms, other problems can develop such as depression, anxiety, difficulty sleeping and poor fitness. In turn, these problems can make your symptoms worse. This becomes a vicious cycle.

Will I always have these symptoms?

No, you will likely recover from MUS in a few weeks or months. In some unusual situations, the symptoms can last for a few years.

Your symptoms may come and go, often returning at times of change such as the start of the school year or a change in your family's routine. Symptoms can return even when you are looking forward to changes, such as going to a summer camp or a sports competition. Sometimes happy changes cause more stress than sad ones!

How can I cope with MUS?

It may be hard to believe that no more tests will be done. But it is important to move on and start to work on your recovery.

Learning to cope with your symptoms can help you function as well as possible, and prevent further problems. Here are some ideas that may help.

Let others help you

- Your health care team and your parents believe that your symptoms are real. We can reassure you that nothing bad is expected to happen.



Get back to your normal daily routine

- A regular schedule of healthy eating, sleeping and exercise is very important. If you aren't eating or sleeping as usual, this needs attention right away.
- Try to go to school every day, keep up with activities and see your friends. Try not to let the symptoms interfere with your daily routine.
- When you have symptoms, try to distract yourself with activities such as playing a board game, watching a movie or spending time with family.

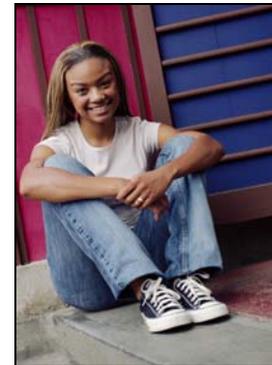


Think about how emotions affect your body

- You may cry at a sad movie, blush when you feel embarrassed or tremble when you give a speech. But did you know that emotional stress can have more subtle effects such as headaches, stomach aches or sleep problems?

Next steps

- If these suggestions don't help, you may want to visit the doctor again. He or she can recheck your symptoms to make sure MUS is still the most likely diagnosis. Your doctor will also check for other health concerns, such as depression and anxiety.
- Your doctor may refer you to another health professional such as a physiotherapist, a social worker or a psychologist.
- Think of this health professional as your coach. He or she can help you to slowly return to normal daily activities, and to better understand and cope with your symptoms.



Notes

