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IS MODERN LIFE MAKING YOU ILL?

You're doing your best to stay healthy but are plagued – and baffled – by aches, pains and overwhelming fatigue. It could be the modern lifestyle, not your body, that's letting you down, says Dita de Boni

THREE YEARS AGO Wendy Milburn was so tired at the end of a working morning that she'd go home to sleep during her lunch hour. It was the only way she could get through the day.

She found staggering out of bed in the morning was getting harder and harder. Her periods were long and draining, her hair was thinning and she says she couldn't function without multiple coffees. But Nelson-based Wendy, not yet 50 at that stage, insists that she was taking care of herself – eating organic food, exercising when she could, and trying very hard to maintain a balanced lifestyle. As a colon hydrotherapist she saw the burnt-out and the weary all day long but remained baffled by her own symptoms.

"I'm a grandmother and it got to the point where I couldn't cope with the children – I'd have to go into another room when they came round," she remembers.

such an extent that working became impossible, and conventional painkillers failed to ease the symptoms. Tests were inconclusive. One doctor suggested the problem was "all in her head".

"It was such a terrible time in my life, because I had always been such a get-up-and-go person, fit and loving life. I went to being overweight, depressed, even suicidal. It was particularly debilitating when people wouldn't believe me, or got sick of hearing about it."

For Shelley and Wendy, years would pass before adequate diagnoses were made – of carpal tunnel syndrome and adrenal fatigue respectively – and successful treatments embarked upon. Neither was suffering a life-threatening illness; rather, stressful lifestyles were causing a range of symptoms that, like a jigsaw, their doctors were failing to fit together.

Their stories are far from unique. It's estimated

BECAUSE SYMPTOMS SEEM SO VAGUE AND UNCONNECTED, HYSTERIA IS SUSPECTED AND ANTI-DEPRESSANTS ARE ALSO PRESCRIBED. BUT THESE WOMEN WON'T FIND LASTING RELIEF

"It was really unbelievable, an incredible level of fatigue. I was pre-menopausal at the time so they did all the tests, but it turned out my hormone levels were about right and my kidneys were functioning fine."

Wendy had just been through a marriage breakdown and left the church she had belonged to for many years. Understandably, doctors took one look at her back story and decided she was depressed. "Anti-depressants did help my mood a bit," says Wendy. "But they weren't really helping my intense fatigue. I didn't fit the profile of someone with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome either."

Depression was also one of the many diagnoses offered to Shelley Farndale, a bubbly and bright 40-year-old now living in rural south Auckland. Long, stressful days at her job at a cheese cafe north of Auckland had led to numb hands, headaches and a growing inability to hold implements. The pain and paralysis grew to

that thousands of Kiwi women may be suffering from conditions such as extreme fatigue, irritable bowel syndrome and carpal tunnel syndrome – conditions which many say are exacerbated, even partly caused, by our modern environment and lifestyle.

It seems particularly cruel that today, when cancers can be detected early and treated, when childbirth can be largely pain-free and safe, and menopause can be eased with sophisticated drugs, so many women continue to suffer annoying, debilitating symptoms.

They present to their doctors with allergies, fatigue and loss of libido, or they may have eczema that won't go away. They have pain, numbness and tingling in their hands or chronic constipation and stomach aches.

Conventional medicine may alleviate their specific complaints. In many cases, because symptoms seem so vague and unconnected, hysteria is suspected, and anti- →



depressants are also prescribed. But these women won't find lasting relief with pain killers, laxatives or anti-depressants, because their complaints stem from a 21st century lifestyle their bodies aren't evolved to cope with.

Or so says Dr James Wilson, an Arizona-based PhD in human nutrition and chiropractic and naturopathic medicine. Dr Wilson (who was recently in New Zealand) believes thousands of Kiwi women may be suffering from chronic fatigue, estrogen dominance and many other stress-related symptoms. He says they're simply saying *c'est la vie* without trying to get to the bottom of it.

Dr Wilson says many of them have something known as adrenal fatigue, a syndrome he's been researching for the past 35 years. Adrenal glands sit atop your kidneys and deal with any stress to the body – either of the injury/disease kind, or that generated by psychological, mental or emotional factors. He contends that when these glands are not functioning properly, health suffers.

"Many women I have seen complain for years of fatigue, sleeping problems, low libido, headaches, short-term memory loss and many other manifestations of stress and may well be low-grade Adrenal Fatigue sufferers," he says. "They stagger through, living half-fulfilled lives. Sometimes the activity of the adrenal

LEFT: Wendy's constant fatigue was misdiagnosed as depression. When she correctly identified her condition as adrenal fatigue and changed her lifestyle accordingly, she felt better in weeks. **ABOVE:** Shelley was told by one doctor that her numb hands and headaches were "all in her head"; they were later found to be caused by carpal tunnel syndrome.

glands is so diminished they have difficulty getting out of bed for more than a few hours each day."

Reading Dr Wilson's book *Adrenal Fatigue: The 21st Century Stress Syndrome* was what finally ended Wendy Milburn's difficulties. She adopted the suggested regime – a combination of less stress, better food, exercise, and dietary supplements – and felt better after two weeks. "I slept through the night and had more energy during the day," says Wendy. "My period came with none of the usual hassle – it just came and went. One of the biggest changes I've noticed is I now drink coffee as a treat. I don't need four or five cups to keep myself going."

Conventional medicine acknowledges a condition called 'adrenal insufficiency', more commonly known as Addison's disease, where the adrenal glands are damaged and cannot produce vital hormones, but there is scepticism about adrenal fatigue. The famed Minnesota-based Mayo Clinic calls it a "medically →

DR WILSON BELIEVES THAT THOUSANDS OF KIWI WOMEN MAY BE SUFFERING FROM CHRONIC FATIGUE, ESTROGEN DOMINANCE AND MANY OTHER STRESS-RELATED SYMPTOMS

unrecognised diagnostic label", an opinion strongly endorsed by the New Zealand Society of Endocrinology.

Although proponents have developed a saliva test they claim can identify adrenal fatigue, it can't be diagnosed using standard medical tests – perhaps one reason conventional medicine finds it hard to swallow.

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is another condition which, while hard to diagnose, is attributed partly to our modern lifestyle and diet. Some estimates suggest as many as a quarter of all women suffer mild to major symptoms of IBS, including bloating and discomfort, abdominal pain and chronic diarrhoea or constipation. But Rebekah Paddy, a naturopath and medical herbalist at Auckland's Mother-Well, says IBS can be difficult to diagnose as the symptoms are random and, again, it can't be tested for. "The one thing we know, however, is that any symptoms are always exacerbated by stress."

She says food allergies and intolerances are often contributing factors, but lifestyle also play a big part. "Women are doing so much these days. Those I see are often mothers, or wanting to be mothers, which adds an extra level of stress. They work hard and are time-poor and this can lead to eating on the run, not eating enough or not regularly enough. They may then have a large dinner late at night and feel bloated – it often comes back to not having enough time."

Rebekah estimates about 60% of all her patients – whether they're suffering digestive complaints, reproductive issues or anything else – are feeling the effects of stress. "It can be frustrating when symptoms arise and tests show nothing: And yet the patient knows something is wrong."

Take Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS), for example. Sufferers often cite constant use of a typewriter, computer, or musical instrument. But the condition's causes continue to be the subject of debate, especially after recent studies which suggest OOS occurs most in high-stress workplaces where there is poor support and low job satisfaction.

Carpal tunnel syndrome, where pinched nerves in the wrist cause numbness and weakness in the hand, is recognised. But the link between carpal tunnel and work activities is hotly debated around the world – possibly because billions of dollars in compensation claims are paid out each year to employees claiming they developed carpal tunnel on the job.

Shelley Farndale was one of those who battled the Accident Compensation Corporation for almost a decade to get sickness benefits for her carpal tunnel "nightmare" – although, as she points out, carpal tunnel

was probably just the first step of a long and painful decade of visiting osteopaths, doctors, psychiatrists and other specialists to get the root of her problems.

She still can't use her arms for more than the most minor of tasks and must do daily relaxation and stretching exercises to maintain some use of her upper limbs. But with the help of Auckland's Regional Pain Service, as well as alternative therapies like acupuncture, Shelley's learned to respond differently to the pain in her arms and neck. And she's retraining as an early childhood teacher with the hope of eventually working three days a week.

"The whole experience has totally changed my life in so many ways," says Shelley. "I've had to become the opposite of the 'black and white', A-type personality I was before. Working with children is fantastic as they don't judge you and they are fun. It's a lifestyle change, and while I still have down days, I can see a light at the end of the tunnel now." ■

To order a copy of Dr Wilson's book *Adrenal Fatigue* (\$29.99 inc. freight) visit your local Whitcoulls store.

No cause for weeping

There's at least one common problem stemming from our modern environment that's not the least bit debatable: Eye strain. According to senior optometrist Andrew Bailey from OPSM in Christchurch, there's been a notable increase in clients citing non-specific symptoms, including eye fatigue, tired eyes and blurry vision, that are collectively given the term "asthenopia".

Office work, specifically in front of a computer, is the problem. After the age of 40, many people buy multi-focal specs, but using them to look at computers means the wearer's head must be tilted up to look through the limited intermediate focusing area. This often leads to neck strain and decreased work performance.

Andrew says an office lens can help. "These are designed with a good middle and close range, allowing the head and neck to be in a comfortable position."

He says taking micro breaks is important and eye drops can help keep eyes lubricated from an onslaught of drying air conditioning, while supplements such as omega-3 and omega-6 can help post-menopausal eyes.

"The modern office has probably sent more people to optometrists than anything, with most requiring mild prescriptions. It's worth being aware of the problem so that people don't just suffer dry, sore eyes and eye fatigue in silence. There are things that can be done."