

Complex Chronic Illness Support Members Meeting Resources

March 2021



Skin and Temperature Support

Skin

Skin and temperature related issues are commonplace for those with ME/CFS FM (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/ Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) and can not only be used to help diagnose these conditions but can also indicate fluctuations occurring. Some of the most common related skin and temperature issues and how to manage them are discussed below.

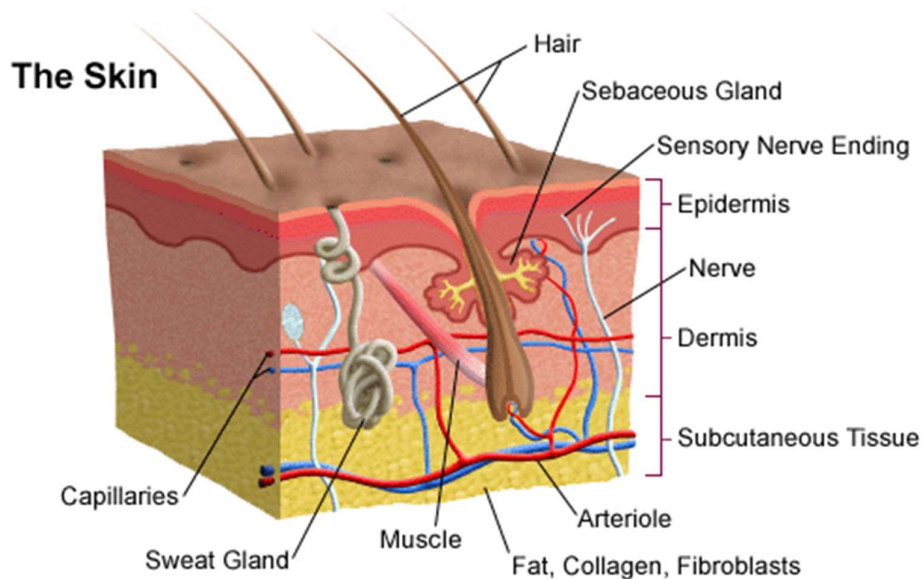


Fig.1. Diagram of the skin

The skin is our largest organ, providing us with a protective layer from the external environment. It is made up of 3 main layers: the epidermis, the dermis and subcutaneous fat layer.

Functions of the skin include:

- **Protection** against infection, dehydration, UV light, and injury
- **Sensation** to pain, temperature, touch, and deep pressure
- **Mobility** allowing flex and smooth movement of the body
- **Vitamin D production** for calcium absorption and healthy bones
- **Excretion** of waste via sebum and sweat
- **Immunity** via production of cytokines
- **Temperature regulation** via sweat glands and blood vessels

The skin and onset of ME/CFS

Some people with ME/CFS link the onset of their condition to a skin problem. This may have been a rash due to a viral infection such as chicken pox or glandular fever. There are two types of herpes virus HSV-1 – cold sores and shingles and HSV-2 genital herpes. These can lie dormant and reappear when a person is rundown. Relapses can accompany a recurrence in the skin condition. Treating the symptoms can give relief and help overcome a relapse.

Common skin conditions in ME/CFS FM (Fibromyalgia):

Pallor

This refers to an unhealthy pale appearance which usually occurs during the initial phases of ME/CFS and during relapses.

Rashes

Most typically are 'lace-like' covering the face and chest. Rashes are often experienced by those who are prone to allergies and can be caused by an allergic reaction / immune response to a substance consumed or stress (hives), or touched (contact dermatitis), or a reaction to a medication. Most skin rashes are resolved by avoiding the irritant or allergen that caused it.

Understanding the cause of the rash will help you to manage the treated. If you are unsure a patch test by your medical provider can help you to achieve this. It is important to let your doctor know if you believe your rash is caused by your medications. They will likely discuss possibilities such as lowering your dose or changing the medication.

Managing your rash at home:

- Drink plenty of water – Dry skin can cause itching which can lead to a rash. Increase fluid intake to hydrate your body and skin
- Apply sunscreen – Apply SPF 30+ sunscreen and wear protective clothing (even on overcast days) to avoid sunburn and a skin rash
- Take a lukewarm shower or bath – this can ease itchiness associated with a rash
- Apply a topical over the counter anti-itch cream following the instructions of your pharmacist
- Don't scratch a rash – This exacerbates itchiness, can damage the skin and worsen the rash
- Apply a cold compress – Wrap an ice pack in a towel or use a cool flannel for. This can help to stop itchiness, inflammation and pain
- Avoid scented soaps and lotions as these can irritate and worsen the rash

Importantly never ignore a rash that does not improve with treatment or worsens. Seek immediate medical assistance if the rash is accompanied by symptoms such as a fever or difficulty breathing. A persistent rash could be a symptom of another illness such as lupus and should be evaluated by your doctor.

Contact dermatitis

Contact dermatitis is an inflammation of the skin which is caused by contact with a substance and can last several days or weeks. Contact dermatitis can affect any area of the body and can include redness, blisters, swelling, dryness, cracking and crusting of the skin. Common irritants include soaps and detergents, cosmetics, excessive immersion in water, mild acids and alkalis and solvents. Contact dermatitis is almost always itchy.

Dry skin

Can be caused by dry air, soaps, sun exposure, woollen clothing, irritants such as detergents not rinsed from clothes and sheets and systemic conditions. Dry skin can also result from low thyroid (not uncommon in ME/CFS), which will improve with thyroid support.

Peeling skin

Can be a result of zinc or vitamin B6 deficiency (both common in ME/CFS), which will improve with appropriate dietary adjustments and/or supplements.

Acne

Pimples and pustules most commonly affect the face, neck, back and shoulders. People with ME/CFS FM may have more problems with acne as they spend less time outside; moderate sunshine can improve acne. Hormone fluctuations resulting from hypothalamus dysregulation are another likely cause. Acne can also be exacerbated by stress hormones leading to an

overproduction of oil from the sebaceous glands. It is important to deal with this problem as infected pimples can increase an already activated immune system.

Altered or lost sensation

Tingling, numbness, hypersensitivity, and pain on being touched. This includes sensitivity to textures, types of clothing and temperature and even slight pressure. Often people with ME/CFS FM report burning, itching or crawling sensations. Altered skin sensations can also be an indication of a medical event or condition so seek medical assistance.

Temperature regulation and support

What is our normal temperature range?

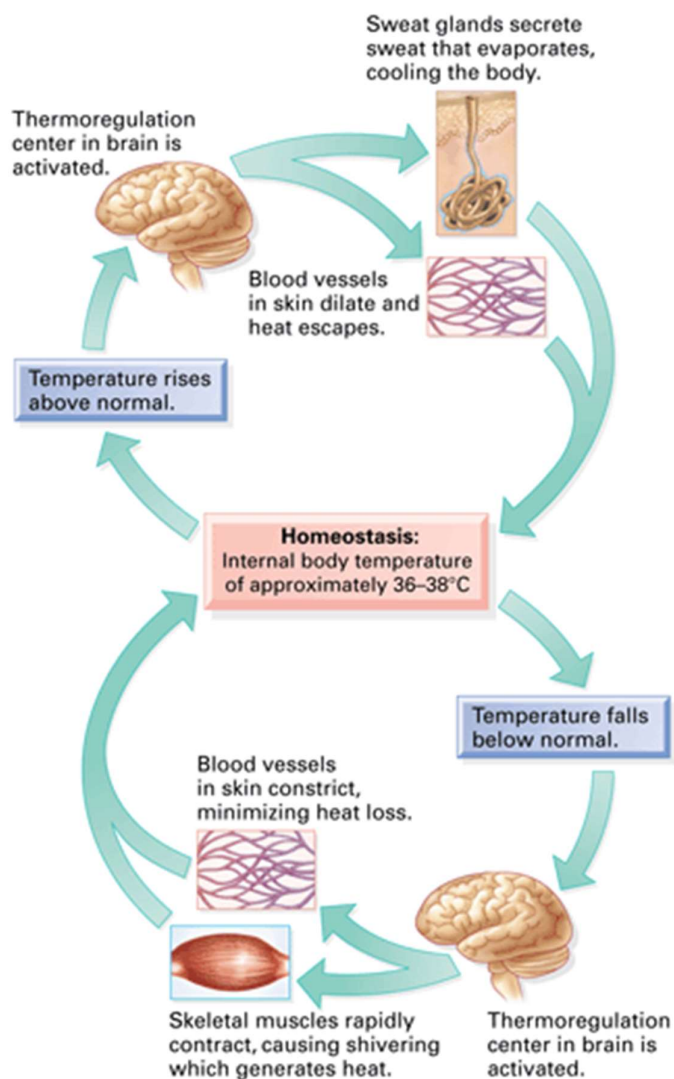
The normal temperature for the human body is typically 36.5-37.5 degrees Celsius or 97.7-99.5 Fahrenheit. The average temperature is 37 Celsius and is maintained by thermoregulation. Body temperature normally fluctuates throughout the day following our circadian rhythm- our day night sleep cycle.

So, what is thermoregulation?

This is the mechanism by which we are able to maintain our body temperature, and regulates itself independent of the temperature outside the body.

So, what controls our body temperature?

Our core temperature is controlled by the hypothalamus in the brain and is most simply explained by the diagram below (Fig. 2).



(Fig. 2). (ThingLink, (n.d).

Did you know?

Our lowest body temperature is around 4am in the morning and at its highest late afternoon.

And how does this relate to ME/CFS FM?

Temperature dysregulation, heat intolerance and cold intolerance are common symptoms of many chronic illnesses including Dysautonomia, Fibromyalgia and ME/CFS.

The International Consensus Criteria for ME indicators of temperature instability are listed as; - subnormal body temperature - marked fluctuations of temperature throughout the day - sweating episodes - recurrent feelings of feverishness with or without low grade fever - cold extremities, e.g. fingers and toes. It has been reported that 75-80% of those diagnosed with ME/CFS have one or more of the above symptoms.

If you find that you are sensitive to temperature and your symptoms flare you may need to monitor the temperature around you and take steps to keep yourself comfortable.

Ways to manage heat intolerance

- Avoiding direct sunlight or going out during the hottest times of the day (11am-3pm)
- Using air conditioning or a fan if you are inside
- Plan ahead- a portable handheld fan can be useful for when you are out and about
- Wearing light coloured, loose fitting, breathable fabrics
- Wear layers you can easily peel back
- Use a broad brimmed hat or sunshade such as a parasol
- Sip on a cold drink, and/or suck on ice cubes or frozen fruit
- Invest in an insulated bottle to keep fluids ice cold
- Spray face and wrists with a mister or a cooling spray available at the pharmacy or shop
- Choose light meals such as salads, cold fruit smoothies or a cooling desert
- Take a cool bath, shower or swimming in a pool
- A cool damp fabric or towel around the back of the neck can help to cool the body
- Avoiding more strenuous activities during warmer weather or in warm rooms
- Cooling garments are available such as cooling pillows, cooling neck wraps and cooling vests (see below)



Nb: Carefully monitor for signs of heat related illness including nausea, vomiting, dizziness, rapid pulse, heavy sweating, muscle cramps, headaches, fainting and mood changes. Seek immediate medical attentions for inability to sweat even when very warm, confusion, loss of consciousness or a body temperature of over 39.4 Celsius/103 Fahrenheit.

Did you know?

Cooling garments

There are many different options for staying cool including hats, scarves, ties and wrist bands. These contain a gel or other substance that you pre-cool before wearing, usually by soaking in water. The cooling effect can last from a few hours to several days depending on the product. There are also more expensive options available that involve active cooling technology requiring a battery. Cool vests incorporate cooling packs fitted into the lining of a garment, keeping the torso cool.

There are also many cooling pillow options available including regular pillows made with cooler materials, pillows with cooling gel pads attached, or gel pads that you can put on top of your existing pillow. Memory foam can retain heat and be uncomfortable in hot conditions, so you may wish to save that for winter, or select a reversible option with a cool side and a warm side.

Ways to manage cold intolerance

- Layer up with turtlenecks, long-sleeved shirts and leggings
- Invest in clothing made of polypropylene (a chemical that keeps you warm and draws water away from the skin).
- Wear a hat with ear protection
- Have hand covering options – light gloves, woollen gloves, fancy gloves
- Scarves - you may use a scarf all year round so look for one that's washable and compact
- Hot food gives your body the fuel it needs to generate heat
- Sip on hot beverages
- Thermal socks and thermal underwear can be a good option
- Carry a sweater even in the summer months for cool airconditioned buildings
- Move regularly to improve circulation and minimise muscle stiffness brought on by the cold
- If you are sitting for long periods use a blanket that you can wrap around you - some even have sleeves
- Keep your home warm by closing windows, shutting internal doors, and drawing curtains as soon as it begins to get dark
- Turn up the heating if you need to - if increased fuel costs are a worry, check out this [government website](#) out for energy saving tips
- Ensure that your home is well insulated and there are no gaps around the doors
- Pull up a comfy chair in the sunny spots of your home
- Electric blankets, hot water bottles and heat pads are useful at home for keeping warm
- Portable hand warmers or heat activated strips can help you to manage the cold when you need to be outside



Nb: Do not assume that cold sensitivity is always due to ME/CFS FM. There are other conditions like thyroid problems and Reynaud's phenomenon which can be triggered by cold. If in doubt, consult your GP.

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