
Look-Alike Dictionary

Each entry is a condition often mistaken for stress: what it is, how it looks like stress, how it differs, how it's checked, and the chapter that covers it. Each label applies only to the claim just before it. This dictionary helps you recognise what to ask your doctor; it is **not** for diagnosing yourself.

Anxiety disorder. Worry that lasts, comes nearly every day, is hard to control and gets in the way of life. Like stress: tension, poor sleep, a racing heart. Different: it's still there once the load has gone; you avoid places, tasks or people. Treatable; CBT has the strongest evidence among psychological therapies (■■■Strong evidence). Check: the GAD-7, then see a doctor. Chapter 6.

Chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS). Long-lasting, debilitating fatigue with no confirming test. Like stress: tiredness, unrefreshing sleep, brain fog. Different: **feeling worse after exertion**, often delayed by hours or days, with a long recovery. There's no diagnostic test; suspect it when debilitating fatigue, post-exertional malaise, unrefreshing sleep and cognitive difficulties have lasted at least six weeks; don't use fixed incremental exercise programmes (■■■Strong evidence). Chapter 12.

Depression. Like stress: tiredness, poor sleep, poor concentration, irritability. Different: emptiness, loss of interest even in things you used to enjoy, lasting many weeks. In men it often shows as anger, drinking more, risk-taking (■■■Debated). Chapters 6, 9 and Volume 11.

Iron deficiency. Low iron stores (ferritin), with or without anaemia. Like stress: tiredness, poor concentration, palpitations. Different: breathless on the stairs, heavy periods, a plant-based diet, regular blood donation. In people who are iron deficient but not anaemic, iron supplements moderately reduce self-rated fatigue (■■■ **Moderate evidence**). Check: ferritin and a blood count. Don't take iron before you've been tested. Chapters 4, 8.

Low testosterone (testosterone deficiency). In some men, low testosterone with symptoms. Like stress: tiredness, low libido, irritability, poor concentration. Diagnose only with consistent symptoms and an unequivocally, consistently low morning fasting testosterone; repeat the test to confirm (■■■ **Strong evidence**). Often a consequence of belly fat, sleep apnoea or alcohol. Chapter 9.

Medicine and substance side effects. Caffeine, alcohol, decongestants, asthma inhalers, corticosteroids, stimulants, drowsy antihistamines, sleeping pills and many other medicines can cause symptoms that look like stress. Alcohol speeds sleep onset but disrupts the second half of the night (■■■ **Strong evidence**). Check: the cup and cabinet inventory, then ask a pharmacist. Don't stop prescription medicines yourself. Chapters 7, 11.

Overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism). Like stress: a racing heart, restlessness, poor sleep, irritability. Different: weight loss despite eating more, feeling hot, a tremor, more frequent bowel movements. It can cause palpitations, tremor, weight loss and heat intolerance, like anxiety; diagnosis needs tests, starting with TSH (■■■ **Strong evidence**). Chapter 3.

Perimenopause. The years before the final period, when hormones fluctuate. Like stress: poor sleep, irritability, brain fog, tiredness. Different: changing periods, hot flushes, night sweats. In otherwise healthy people aged 45 and over with typical symptoms, it is diagnosed on symptoms, without hormone tests (■■■ **Strong evidence**). It can come with iron deficiency or thyroid disease. Chapter 8.

Restless legs syndrome. An uncomfortable feeling in the legs with an urge to move them, worse lying down in the evening. Like stress: trouble sleeping. Different: eases when you get up and walk; a partner notices kicking or twitching. People with clinically significant restless legs should have iron tested; first deal with

aggravating factors such as alcohol, caffeine and some medicines (■■■ **Moderate evidence**). Chapters 5, 11.

Sleep apnoea. The airway collapses repeatedly during the night. Like stress: tiredness, light sleep, poor concentration. Different: loud snoring, pauses in breathing others notice, morning headaches, drowsiness while driving. It causes daytime sleepiness and more road accidents; treatment reduces both (■■■ **Strong evidence**). Chapter 5.

Supraventricular tachycardia. A common heart rhythm disorder. Like stress: episodes of a racing heart, palpitations, often during tense moments. Different: episodes start and stop suddenly, with a very regular, very fast beat. It can be misdiagnosed as panic disorder; 24-hour monitors often miss episodes (■■■ **Debated**). Chapters 3, 6.

Underactive thyroid (hypothyroidism). Like stress: tiredness, sluggishness, low mood, poor concentration. Different: feeling cold, weight gain, constipation, dry skin, a change in voice. Diagnosed with a blood test and treatable (■■■ **Strong evidence**). Chapter 4.

Vitamin B12 deficiency. Like stress: tiredness, slow thinking, forgetfulness, mood changes. Different: numbness or tingling in the hands and feet, poor balance; common in vegans, older people and people taking metformin or acid-reducing medicines long term. It can cause neurological and cognitive symptoms; it can be tested for and treated (■■■ **Moderate evidence**). Chapter 7.