

Functional Neurological Disorder (Conversion Disorder): A Guide for Patients & Families

Functional Neurological Disorder (FND), sometimes called conversion disorder, is a condition in which individuals experience neurological symptoms that are not caused by structural damage to the brain or nerves, but rather by changes in how the brain functions. These symptoms are real and can be very distressing. FND can affect movement, sensation, and thinking, and may occur in older adults, especially during periods of stress, illness, or life changes. With proper understanding and treatment, many people experience improvement.

Common Signs & Symptoms

- Weakness or paralysis without a clear neurological cause
- Tremors or abnormal movements
- Difficulty walking or balance problems
- Episodes that resemble seizures (non-epileptic events)
- Speech difficulties
- Sensory changes such as numbness or tingling
- Sudden changes in vision or hearing

How FND May Present in Older Adults

- Sudden onset of neurological symptoms
- Symptoms that vary over time or situation
- Worsening symptoms with stress or fatigue
- Coexisting anxiety, depression, or medical illness
- Symptoms that do not match typical neurological patterns

Why These Symptoms Occur

- Changes in how the brain processes signals
- Stress or emotional factors affecting physical function
- Past trauma or psychological stressors
- Medical illness or hospitalization triggering symptoms
- The brain's "software" functioning differently, not structural damage

Diagnosis

- Careful neurological and medical evaluation
- Identification of symptoms that are inconsistent with known neurological diseases
- Ruling out other medical or neurological conditions
- Diagnosis is based on positive clinical signs, not just absence of disease

Treatment & Management

Education

- Understanding that symptoms are real but potentially reversible
- Clear explanation of the diagnosis often helps improve symptoms

Therapies

- Physical therapy focused on functional movement
- Occupational therapy
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Stress management techniques

Medication

- Medications may be used to treat associated anxiety, depression, or sleep problems
- There is no single medication that treats FND directly

Ways Families Can Help


- Validate that symptoms are real and distressing
- Encourage participation in therapy and rehabilitation
- Support structured daily routines
- Avoid reinforcing disability while encouraging gradual independence
- Provide emotional support without judgment

When to Seek Medical Attention


- New or worsening neurological symptoms
- Falls or safety concerns
- Severe anxiety or depression
- Difficulty functioning at home

National Organizations & Resources

- ✓ FND Hope

 fndhope.org

- ✓ National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS)

 ninds.nih.gov

- ✓ National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

 nimh.nih.gov

- ✓ Eldercare Locator

 1-800-677-1116 |  eldercare.acl.gov

Final Notes

- Functional Neurological Disorder causes real neurological symptoms without structural brain damage.
- Symptoms are often treatable with the right therapies and support.
- Early recognition and a supportive approach can improve outcomes.