A Simple ‘Poor Man’s Test’ for Orthostatic Intolerance

Developed by Dr. David Bell, an excellent and very caring CFS researcher, this test is easily done in the office and requires only a blood pressure cuff – and a good nurse to catch the person before he passes out.

The test is relatively simple.

- Check the blood pressure and pulse several times while the person is lying down for 10 minutes.
- Then have the person stand quietly (with a blood pressure cuff on) without moving or leaning on any object for 30 minutes or as long as tolerated. Check the BP and pulse every few minutes. If the person feels as if he/she is about to faint, the test is also stopped and considered a positive test.

This is called a poor man’s tilt test, and Bell finds that most people with CFS flunk this test, showing one of the following three common abnormalities while standing:

1. a drop in systolic blood pressure (the top number) of more than 20 points;
2. POTS: the heart rate increases at least 26 beats per minute (BPM) over the resting heart rate;
3. narrowing of the pulse pressure. The pulse pressure is the difference between the upper number of the BP and the lower number. For example, a normal person with a BP of 120/70 would have a pulse pressure of 50. It is actually this difference between the upper (systolic) and lower blood pressure numbers (diastolic) that circulates blood. If the pulse pressure drops below 18, it is abnormal, and not enough to help blood circulate properly to your brain and other tissues.

Patients should be tested late morning or early afternoon with no unusual activity prior to testing. Large meals and large volumes of fluid prior to testing should be avoided.