

Fatigue

What is fatigue? “**Fatigue**” means feeling very tired and having little energy. Fatigue can be caused by working hard and not getting enough rest. This type of fatigue is often temporary and improves with rest.

Fatigue can occur with many illnesses and medical conditions. It can also be caused by medication and other treatments for your illness. Fatigue from illness or treatment does not improve with rest and can seriously affect your ability to function. This type of fatigue may affect your physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

What Are Signs and Symptoms of Fatigue?

- Your whole body feels weak or tired after little or no activity
- Lack of energy or interest in activities
- Not feeling rested after sleeping
- Problems with thinking, lack of focus, short attention span, or memory problems
- Irritability, impatience, sadness, or other changes in mood

What Causes Fatigue?

Fatigue may be related to our habits and how we live, such as:

- Spending too much time in a chair or in bed
- Exercising more than you can tolerate
- Using alcohol or illegal drugs
- Not enough sleep or poor sleep
- Constant stress and worry

Fatigue may also be caused by many other factors. You may want to ask your doctor specific questions:

- Is the fatigue due to one or more of my medical problems, like cancer, heart disease, chronic lung disease, kidney disease, or HIV?
- Is the fatigue due to a complication of my medical problems, such as low blood count, infection, or chronic pain?
- Is the fatigue due to a medication I am taking?
- Is the fatigue due to stress, worry, anxiety or depression?

What May Help?

The six “E’s” to manage fatigue:

1. **Evaluate:** Keep a daily record of your fatigue level and activities that increase or decrease fatigue to share with your doctor.
2. **Energy Saving:** Find ways to organize and pace your daily activities to make you less tired. Do important tasks when you have more energy and be sure to rest between activities.
3. **Exercise:** Too much bedrest can make you feel more tired. Simple exercise like walking or stretching can give you more energy.
4. **Energy Building:** Some activities, like listening to music or playing games and cards, can help reduce fatigue and build mental energy.
5. **Easing Stress:** Chronic stress can make it harder to sleep and add to fatigue. Ask your doctor for a referral to a social worker or psychologist who can teach you relaxation exercises that can reduce stress and improve rest or sleep.

6. Eating Well: A well-balanced diet of grains, vegetables, fruits, beans, meat, fish, and dairy products to make sure you get enough calories to maintain a good level of energy. Drinking enough water can prevent dehydration which can make fatigue worse. If you need help with this, ask about a referral to a dietitian.

What Are Some Medical Treatments for Fatigue?

Medical care is focused on the illness causing fatigue. Fortunately, many illnesses that cause fatigue may be treated successfully. For example:

- Medicine for anxiety or depression
- Medicine for chronic pain
- Medicine to control blood sugar
- Hormone therapy to regulate thyroid function
- Antibiotics to treat infection
- Machines to help sleep apnea
- Recommendations for diet and exercise
- Vitamin supplements
- Iron supplements for anemia

What Else May Help?

- Use relaxation techniques if you feel stressed or worried.
- Try to improve your sleep. Avoid caffeine (in coffee, tea or cola) after lunch. Don't exercise late in the evening. Don't take a nap in the evening. Try to wake up and go to bed at the same times every day.
- If fatigue is troubling, be sure to tell your doctor and nurse about it. Try keeping a diary of your fatigue and show the diary to your doctor or nurse. Write down your fatigue level twice a day using a number from "0" to "10", where 0 means no fatigue and 10 means the worst possible fatigue. Record your hours of sleep, what you eat, and activities that increase or decrease your energy levels.

0__ 1__ 2__ 3__ 4__ 5__ 6__ 7__ 8__ 9__ 10__
 No Fatigue Moderate Fatigue Worst Possible Fatigue

When Should You See the Doctor About Fatigue?

- If your fatigue has suddenly worsened, has become so bad that you cannot function, or is associated with weakness of the arms or legs, see your doctor for evaluation.
- See your doctor if you have thoughts about suicide or harming yourself or someone else.

Patient Education Series

Fatigue

When your symptoms are managed, you will:

- Enjoy activities and have more energy
- Enjoy family and friends
- Feel less stress and anxiety
- Get better sleep at night
- Have a better quality of life

This educational material is provided by the Palliative Care Project, a partnership between Community Care of Brooklyn and the MJHS Institute for Innovation in Palliative Care.