



Fatigue

There are numerous causes of fatigue that range from lifestyle to physiological. For example, a person may be fatigued because he or she is drinking too much caffeine or not getting enough sleep or he or she may have fatigue because of diabetes or low thyroid hormone production. When fatigue lasts longer than a month and has interfered with a person's daily living without an obvious cause that person should have an evaluation by a health care provider. The workup for fatigue usually takes two appointments.

The first will involve a history, exam, and blood draws. The second occurs several days later at which blood tests are reviewed and treatment initiated. More often than not no blood abnormalities are found. Usually treating the symptoms with lifestyle change is the preferred way to treat idiopathic fatigue (fatigue without a lab abnormality to treat). Very rarely, medications can be used to help. Medications that can help with fatigue have side effects that are often worse than the fatigue itself.

IN GENERAL, WE RECOMMEND THE FOLLOWING LIFESTYLE CHANGES TO EVERYONE WITH FATIGUE. IF EACH OF THESE SUGGESTIONS IS IMPLEMENTED, FATIGUE IS LIKELY TO RESOLVE OVER SEVERAL WEEKS TO MONTHS.

1. EXERCISE REGULARLY.

It is preferable to exercise every day to release natural hormones that improve energy, strengthen muscle, and improve stamina. If you can't do that, get out at least 3 times a week. Cardiovascular exercise like walking, running, swimming, or biking is best for at least 20 minutes an episode. Adding weight training once or twice a week can also be beneficial.

2. GET RID OF JUNK FOOD.

Simple carbohydrates (foods that are processed quickly like white bread or noodles and sweets) get metabolized very rapidly leaving a low glucose level in the blood 1-2 hours after eating. They also cause weight gain. Instead choose whole grain foods and fruits and vegetables. Meats are okay but do not need to be eaten more than once a day. When eating meat choose fish and lean meats over other types and eat red meats rarely.

3. GET REGULAR SLEEP.

The total amount of sleep often is not as important as the pattern. Try and get to sleep and wake up at roughly the same time every day. Avoid naps unless you can take them daily and then try and take them for the same amount of time at the same time every day. Some people feel good with just six or seven hours of sleep a night. Other people may need eight to ten. You should be able to tell how much you need after 1-2 weeks of a regular schedule.

4. GET SOME SUN.

While we do not want sunburns and need to cover up with sunscreen, daily exposure to bright light such as from the sun has been shown to improve mood and fatigue.

6. TREAT DEPRESSION.

This is a very common cause of fatigue and if you don't get it treated appropriately, the fatigue will not get better. If you are sad more than you used to be or if you can't sleep or are losing or gaining weight ask to get screened for depression. Many people think that depression symptoms must be severe before they get treatment, but this is not the case, and often fatigue is the most obvious symptom.

*fa-tigue: extreme tiredness, typically resulting from mental or physical exertion or illness.
synonyms: tiredness, weariness, sleepiness, drowsiness, exhaustion, enervation, lethargy, drained*

7. USE YOUR BRAIN.

Keeping your brain active by reading every day or doing a crossword puzzle or similar activity can stimulate your brain, and improve your energy.

8. GET TESTED FOR SLEEP APNEA:

Sleep apnea is a relatively common problem that leads to excessive daytime fatigue along with other significant medical problems. It can occur in any body type and the initial screening can be done simply and in your own home.

9. AVOID QUICK FIXES.

While caffeine and herbs can temporarily improve your energy, they typically cause rebound fatigue and are not useful in the long run. If you think caffeine is needed, ask us first about long term usage.

10. COME IN FOR FOLLOW UP.

If you have implemented these suggestions and are not improving or if you are worried about some sort of physical or psychological cause of fatigue, we want you to return for additional evaluation. We can also help you decide if medication or treatments may be useful for you.