



Managing fatigue

for people living with MS

Fatigue is a common and frustrating symptom of multiple sclerosis (MS). It is not a highly visible symptom and its potential impact on people living with MS can be difficult for others to understand. This information sheet provides an overview of fatigue in MS and some practical strategies for its management.

How is fatigue in MS different to other types of fatigue?

Ordinary fatigue is described as a sensation of muscular tiredness and weakness. It is the tired feeling everyone experiences after an excessively busy day or a lack of sleep. It is the type of fatigue that is usually managed by rest and a good night's sleep. Ordinary fatigue is quite different to the fatigue experienced in MS.

Fatigue associated with MS is described as an overwhelming sense of tiredness that can occur at any time of the day without warning. MS-fatigue usually occurs more rapidly, lasts longer and takes more time to recover from than ordinary fatigue. MS-fatigue can occur for no apparent reason or after relatively mild exertion, such as a short period of walking, writing or reading, with an immediate need to rest.

As with other symptoms of MS, the effects of fatigue vary from person to person. MS-fatigue can be temporary, such as during a relapse, an infection or unrelated illness, or when initially taking some MS medications. MS-fatigue can also be ongoing (being frequently present) even after rest. The fatigue a person with MS experiences is not always in proportion to the activity undertaken or the person's level of ability.

When a person with MS becomes fatigued, other symptoms can temporarily worsen, such as muscle weakness, visual disturbances, and difficulties with concentrating or making decisions. Equally, MS-fatigue can result from other MS symptoms such as mobility (walking) problems, pain, muscle weakness or depression.

How can I manage the effects of fatigue?

Managing fatigue begins with acknowledging that it is typically a part of having MS, listening to your body, and learning to recognise the early signs of fatigue and how it affects you. Taking a proactive approach to maintaining a healthy lifestyle and balancing your time, energy and stress can all help towards regaining a sense of control.

Because of the complexity of MS-fatigue, the first step in effective management is to identify any secondary factors contributing to your fatigue, which may include coexisting medical conditions, inadequate diet, poor fitness, disrupted sleep, medication side effects, stress, depression, hormonal changes or heat sensitivity.

A number of strategies can then become useful:

- **Keep a healthy, well-balanced diet.** Inadequate carbohydrate intake, fad diets or skipping meals can result in feelings of fatigue and lethargy. Healthy food is the fuel for your body that provides you with energy. Similarly, ensure you stay hydrated throughout the day as dehydration can lead to fatigue.
- **Stay as active as you can.** Low levels of physical activity can result in overall decreased fitness. Talk to your doctor, a physiotherapist or trained fitness instructor about exercises to increase your stamina and strength and that are suited to your ability.

- **Assess your sleep patterns** and identify any unhealthy habits that can be modified. Speak to your doctor if sleep problems persist.
 - **Educate your family and friends** about MS-fatigue and its hidden impact. Don't be afraid to share the load and ask for help when needed.
 - **Seek guidance from your healthcare team** about practical strategies for managing other MS symptoms that may be contributing to your fatigue. Speak to your doctor if you are experiencing depression, which can reduce your motivation and exaggerate feelings of fatigue.
 - **Balance activity with rest** to restore your body and mind and to regain energy. Resting your body and mind can be best achieved through meditation or other relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or listening to relaxing music. It is important to take proactive rest breaks, that is, to rest before you become tired. Schedule in short and frequent rest breaks across the day so that you can work more efficiently and effectively.
 - **Plan for home, work and social activities.** Draw up a daily or weekly schedule and vary heavy with lighter tasks across the day and week.
 - **Be sure not to abandon pleasurable activities,** which can be a great source of energy and joy.
 - **Establish your priorities.** When planning your day and week, first focus on those activities that must be done and leave the not so important tasks to times when you are feeling less fatigued. If your fatigue is greater in the afternoon, try completing jobs that require higher levels of concentration or physical effort in the morning.
 - **Find ways to conserve your energy.** Is there an easier way to do something? Can the job be broken down into smaller tasks? Can you sit down rather than standing up to do an activity? Take a look at your working or home environment – can it be modified? How and where items are stored, the height of working areas, and the types of furnishing and lighting can all influence the amount of energy required to complete an activity.
 - **Manage heat sensitivity.** Even the smallest increase in temperature can increase a person's fatigue. Similar to MS-fatigue and the need to rest and recover, the body needs to cool down if affected by heat and humidity.
 - **Take time to experiment** with ideas to find routines and solutions that work best for you.
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Where can I find more information about managing MS-fatigue?

- **Your neurologist or general practitioner (GP)** can provide information on the medical management of fatigue and any medication side effects which may be increasing your fatigue.
 - **MS Connect (1800 042 138)** is our telephone information and support line. Our team can help answer your questions about MS-fatigue and refer you to health professionals, such as an occupational therapist, in your local community or at MS Australia – ACT/NSW/Vic for advice on how to develop a fatigue action plan.
 - **Come along to one of our education sessions** on MS-fatigue management. These are held periodically throughout the year. Details can be found on our website: www.msaustralia.org.au/actnswvic
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