

Fatigue

Fatigue is a feeling of weariness, tiredness or lack of energy. Fatigue is different from drowsiness. In general, drowsiness is feeling the need to sleep and having a lack of energy and motivation.

Fatigue can be a normal and important response to physical exertion, emotional stress, boredom, or lack of sleep. However, it can also be a sign of a more serious mental or physical condition. When fatigue is not relieved by enough sleep, good nutrition, or a low-stress environment, it should be evaluated by a doctor.

Cause

There are many possible causes of fatigue, including:

- Anemia (including iron deficiency anemia)
- Depression or grief
- Medications such as sedatives or antidepressants
- Persistent pain
- Sleep disorders such as insomnia, obstructive sleep apnea or narcolepsy
- Underactive or overactive thyroid gland
- Use of alcohol or drugs such as cocaine or narcotics, especially with regular use

Fatigue can also occur with the following illnesses:

- Addison's disease
- Anorexia or other eating disorders
- Arthritis
- Autoimmune diseases
- Cancer
- Cushing's Disease
- Congestive heart failure
- Diabetes
- Fibromyalgia
- Infection, especially one that takes a long time to treat
- Kidney disease
- Liver disease
- Malnutrition

Certain medications may also cause drowsiness or fatigue, including:

- Antihistamines for allergies
- Blood pressure medicines

- Sleeping pills
- Diuretics

Signs and Symptoms

Contact a doctor right away if experiencing the following symptoms:

- Confusion
- Dizziness
- Blurred vision
- Little to no urine, or recent swelling and weight gain

Call a doctor if you:

- Have unexplained weakness or fatigue, especially if you also have a fever or unintentional weight loss
- Have constipation, dry skin, weight gain, or cannot tolerate cold
- Wake up and fall back to sleep many times during the night
- Have headaches
- Are taking any medications, prescription or non-prescription, or using drugs that may cause fatigue or drowsiness
- Feel sad or depressed
- Have insomnia

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) is different from fatigue. CFS is a condition that starts with flu-like symptoms and lasts for six months or more. It is diagnosed after all other possible causes of fatigue are ruled out. Most people with CFS do not get much relief from rest.

Diagnosis

The pattern of fatigue may help a doctor determine its cause.

For example, people who wake up in the morning rested but quickly develop fatigue with activity may have a condition such as an underactive thyroid. However, people who wake up with a low level of energy and have fatigue that lasts throughout the day may be depressed.

Tests are done to rule out other illnesses and help determine the cause of fatigue. They include the following:

- Blood tests to check for anemia, diabetes, inflammatory diseases and possible infection
- Kidney function tests
- Liver function tests
- Thyroid function tests
- Urinalysis

Prevention

Some tips for reducing fatigue include:

- Get enough sleep each night
- Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet
- Drink plenty of water throughout the day
- Exercise regularly
- Learn ways to relax such as yoga or meditation
- Maintain a reasonable work and personal schedule
- Change life stressors, if possible and seek help for relationship problems or other issues
- Take a multivitamin
- Avoid alcohol, nicotine and drug use

If experiencing chronic pain or depression, treating it often helps the fatigue. However, some antidepressant medications may cause or worsen fatigue. The medication may have to be adjusted to avoid this problem. However, never stop or change any medications without first talking to the doctor who has prescribed the drug.

Stimulants (including caffeine) are not effective treatments for fatigue. Sedatives also tend to worsen fatigue in the long run.

Resources

- American Academy of Sleep Medicine: www.aasmnet.org
- American Sleep Apnea Association: www.sleepapnea.org
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov
- National Sleep Foundation: www.sleepfoundation.org
- The Better Sleep Council: www.bettersleep.org

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