

Fatigue after brain injury

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is a feeling of tiredness or exhaustion which you may get after doing a physical or mental activity for a long time. It is our body's way of telling us to rest. Normal fatigue goes away after resting, but pathological fatigue, which some people experience after having a brain injury, does not go away and can seriously impact your quality of life.

Why do I have fatigue?

The reasons for having fatigue after a brain injury are not clearly understood yet. It may be due to damage to the brain, or because much more effort has to be made to think or move.

What are the symptoms of fatigue?

If you are experiencing fatigue, you may feel:

- Exhausted or overwhelmingly tired
- Weak and lacking in energy
- Unable to think clearly and have difficulty concentrating, making decisions and controlling your emotions.

You may find that the symptoms associated with your brain injury get worse.

How do I recognise when I feel fatigued?

An important step in managing your fatigue is recognising when you are fatigued. When you have had a brain injury, it may be harder to notice when this is. Asking people around you, like family or colleagues, what signs they notice, may be helpful to you.

You may notice:

- You feel sick
- Your arms and legs feel heavy
- You find it hard to concentrate or become forgetful
- Your eyesight blurs
- You become irritable or restless
- You feel dizzy
- Your speech is slurred
- You yawn a lot.

However, everyone is different and you may notice different symptoms. Try keeping a diary of your day and recording what you notice.

How do I manage my fatigue?

Pace yourself

Spread tasks out throughout the week so that that your activities are more balanced. For example, if you work during the week, leave household tasks until the weekend. See if you can break big tasks into smaller chunks and consider asking for help from friends and family. Prioritise important tasks and leave smaller tasks for another time.

Eat well

Stick to a healthy, balanced diet. This will improve your general health and help you to avoid feeling sluggish during the day.

Try and include the following in your meals every day:

- Fruit and vegetables
- Starchy foods (wholegrain foods and high fibre cereals)
- Dairy or dairy alternatives (low fat cheeses, milk, yoghurt, soya)
- Proteins (meat, fish, eggs, tofu, beans, pulses, nuts)
- Small amounts of unsaturated fats.

Make sure you drink plenty of water too. Look at <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/> for more information about healthy eating.

Sleep well

If you need to rest during the day, try not to sleep for more than 30 minutes. Keep a regular bedtime routine, with no late nights, and avoid large meals, TV, caffeine, nicotine and alcohol just before going to bed. Getting plenty of daylight during the day is also important.

Exercise

Find an exercise you enjoy doing, and try and do some every week. Government guidelines recommend 30 minutes of moderate exercise a day. It's also important to find something that relaxes you. Yoga and Tai-Chi may be good activities to help you relax.

Look at <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/> for more information about exercise.

Plan

Set yourself realistic goals and remember to praise yourself when you achieve them. Plan for important events (for example, trips away) and accept that you may not be able to attend the whole thing. Remember to factor in travel time, and be prepared to feel fatigued for a day or so after a big occasion.

Be kind to yourself

Recognise when you have accomplished something and celebrate what you have achieved. Try not to worry too much about what you haven't managed to do that day. Acknowledge your feelings, but try not to dwell on them. Remember to plan time doing things that you enjoy and that make you feel good about yourself.

Use cognitive strategies

If you find that you become forgetful when you are tired, there are techniques (or 'cognitive strategies' that you can use to help you remember things:

- Make lists, for example shopping lists or 'To do' lists
- Write reminders to yourself on post-it notes or cue cards
- Use flow charts to help you plan and make decisions
- Concentrate on one thing at a time. Don't try to do lots of tasks at once
- Use a diary or your phone to plan your day
- Set alarms to remind you to do certain things, or to take a break.

Who do I contact if I need help?

Level 8A West at Brighton Hospital.

Direct ward number: 01273 523173 Ward Ext: 4357/4358 Office Ext: 4355

References and further resources:

- Headway, the Brain Injury Association (www.headway.org.uk/)
- The Brain and Spine Foundation (www.brainandspine.org.uk/)
- NHS Live Well (www.nhs.uk/live-well/)
- Nice Clinical Knowledge Summary tiredness/fatigue in adults (<https://cks.nice.org.uk/tirednessfatigue-in-adults>).

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