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Fatigue: More Than Being Tired

“You better get up soon,” Dan called to his wife, Liang. “The grandchildren will be here in an hour for lunch.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Liang said. “I feel so tired. I’m not even sure I can get out of bed. I just don’t seem to have any energy—not even for my family.”

Everyone feels tired now and then. Sometimes, like Liang, you may just want to stay in bed. But, after a good night’s sleep, most people feel refreshed and ready to face a new day. If you continue to feel tired for weeks, it’s time to see your doctor. He or she may be able to help you find out what’s causing your fatigue and may even suggest you become more active.

Some Illnesses Cause Fatigue

Feeling fatigued can be like an alarm going off in your body. It may be

the first sign that something is wrong. But, fatigue itself is not a disease. For example, many older people live with rheumatoid arthritis, a painful condition that affects the joints, usually in hands or feet. In addition to their pain, people with rheumatoid arthritis often complain of other symptoms such as fatigue. Or, people with cancer may feel fatigued from the disease or treatments, or both. They may be dealing with pain and nausea as well. These are just two examples of situations where talking to your healthcare provider about feeling fatigued may lead to helpful solutions—for instance, adding mild exercises to your daily routine.

Many medical problems and treatments can add to fatigue. These include:

- ◆ Taking certain medications, such as antidepressants, antihistamines, and medicines for nausea and pain
- ◆ Having medical treatments, like chemotherapy and radiation
- ◆ Recovering from major surgery

What Role Do Emotions Play?

Are you fearful about the future? Do you worry about your health and who will take care of you? Are you afraid you

are no longer needed? Emotional worries like these can take a toll on your energy. Fatigue can be linked to many emotions, including:

- ◆ Anxiety
- ◆ Depression
- ◆ Grief from loss of family, friends, or home of many years
- ◆ Stress from financial or personal problems
- ◆ Feeling that you no longer have control over your life

Exercise or other physical activity may help relieve emotional problems such as anxiety and stress.

Personal Habits

Some people have lifestyle habits that rob them of energy. Here are some things that may be a drag on you:

- ◆ **Staying up too late.** A good night's sleep is important to feeling refreshed and energetic. Try going to bed and waking up at the same time every day.
- ◆ **Having too much caffeine.** If you drink caffeinated drinks like soda, tea, or coffee

late in the day, it can keep you from having a good night's sleep. Limit the amount of caffeine you take during the day and have non-caffeinated drinks in the evening.

◆ **Drinking too much alcohol.** Alcohol changes the way you think and act. It may also interact with your medical treatments. Be careful with the amount you drink.

◆ **Eating junk food.** Say “no thanks” to food with empty calories like chips and cookies. You need nutritious food in order to have the energy to do the things you enjoy.

Being bored can also make you feel fatigued. That may sound strange, but it's true. If you have been very busy during your working years, when you stop working you may find yourself a little lost about how to spend your time. When you wake up in the morning, you may see long days stretching before you with nothing planned. It doesn't have to be that way. Research shows that engaging in social and productive activities that you enjoy, like volunteering in your community, may help maintain your wellbeing. Think about what interests you and what you have to offer, and look for places to volunteer.

See Your Doctor

If you've been tired for several weeks with no letup, it may be time to call your healthcare provider. He or she will ask questions about your sleep, daily activities, appetite, and exercise and will likely give you a physical exam and order lab tests.

Your treatment will be based on your history and the results of your exam and lab tests. If medications are prescribed, they may target underlying health problems, such as anemia or irregular thyroid activity. Your provider may suggest that you eat a well-balanced diet and begin an exercise program.

A Special Kind Of Fatigue

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) is a special condition that typically involves fatigue that lasts 6 months or longer and is not related to other diseases or conditions. The symptoms of CFS can include muscle pain, memory problems, headaches, and tender lymph nodes. CFS usually occurs in people who are middle-aged and affects more women than men. It can last for years and may change every part of your life. CFS is probably not the same as the fatigue that affects many people when they get older.

What Can You Do?

There are many lifestyle changes you can make that will help you get the most out of life. Here are some suggestions:

- ◆ Keep a fatigue diary so you can pinpoint certain times of the day or situations that make you feel more or less tired.
- ◆ Exercise regularly. Moderate exercise may improve your appetite, energy, and outlook. Some people find that exercises combining balance and breathing (for example tai chi and yoga) improve their energy.
- ◆ Try to avoid long naps that can leave you feeling groggy in the middle of the day and may make it harder to fall asleep at night.
- ◆ Stop smoking. Smoking is linked to many diseases and disorders such as cancer, heart disease, and breathing problems that can be a drain on your energy.
- ◆ Some people have so much to do that just thinking about it can make them feel tired. If you feel swamped, ask for help. Working with others may make a job go faster and be more fun.

What About Liang?

Liang went to see her doctor because she had been feeling so tired. Dr. Castillon suggested she join a regular exercise program to help strengthen her muscles and balance. He told her that in terms of muscles the old saying “use it or lose it” is true. Liang signed up for a class twice a week at her local senior center. She and Dan began taking long walks in their neighborhood. Now, they both look forward to visits from their grandchildren.

For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

National Cancer Institute

6116 Executive Boulevard

Suite 300

Bethesda, MD 20892-8322

1-800-422-6237 (1-800-4-CANCER)

www.cancer.gov

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

P.O. Box 7923

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-7923

1-888-644-6226 (toll-free)

1-866-464-3615 (TTY/toll-free)

www.nccam.nih.gov

National Library of Medicine MedlinePlus

www.medlineplus.gov

For more information about health and aging, including sleep, nutrition, volunteering, and exercise, contact:

**National Institute on Aging
Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

www.nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov/espanol

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Visit *www.nihseniorhealth.gov*, a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health and wellness information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to make the type larger.



National Institute on Aging

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