SYMPTOM

Fatigue

Fatigue is a lasting lack of energy that rest may not fully relieve.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Feeling drained, slowed down, or unable to recharge

WHERE IT IS FELT
The whole body and mind

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Poor sleep, stress, minor illnesses

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Sudden severe fatigue with fever or unusual bleeding

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to weeks, depending on sleep, illness, and health

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Lasting several weeks, worsening, or affecting daily life

Overview

Fatigue means having less physical or mental energy than usual. You may feel exhausted, heavy, slowed down, or unable to complete normal activities. Rest may help, but it does not always restore your energy fully.

Fatigue is different from sleepiness. Sleepiness is the urge to fall asleep, while fatigue is a lack of energy or stamina. They can occur together. Fatigue is also different from muscle weakness, which means a loss of strength.

Almost everyone feels fatigued at times. It can follow poor sleep, stress, overwork, a minor infection, or a major life change. When fatigue continues, several physical, emotional, sleep-related, or medication-related causes may need to be considered.

What it may feel or look like

Fatigue can affect both your body and your thinking. You may notice:

The pattern can provide useful clues. Fatigue may be present all day, become worse later in the day, or appear after physical or mental activity. Note whether you are also sleepy, short of

breath, in pain, feverish, low in mood, or losing weight without trying.

- Low energy or a heavy feeling
- Needing longer to complete ordinary tasks
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things
- Less motivation or interest in activities
- Feeling exhausted after limited effort
- Headaches, irritability, or slower reactions
- Sleep that does not feel refreshing

Common causes

Common causes include too little sleep, disrupted sleep, emotional stress, caring responsibilities, shift work, travel, and doing more physical activity than your body is used to. Viral illnesses can cause fatigue during recovery, sometimes after other symptoms have improved.

Lifestyle factors may contribute. These include irregular meals, limited fluid intake, heavy alcohol use, or very little activity. Fatigue can also be a side effect of medicines, including some allergy medicines, pain medicines, antidepressants like sertraline or fluoxetine , blood pressure medicines, and sedatives. Do not stop a prescribed medicine without medical advice.

Less common causes include anemia, which means too few healthy red blood cells; thyroid disorders; diabetes; sleep apnea, which repeatedly interrupts breathing during sleep; and conditions affecting the heart, lungs, kidneys, or liver. Anxiety and depression can cause prominent physical fatigue, even when sadness or worry is not the main concern.

Long COVID and myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome, often called ME/CFS, can involve ongoing fatigue. A key feature of ME/CFS is worsening symptoms after activity, known as post-exertional malaise. Fatigue alone does not mean that you have this condition.

Urgent causes are less common. Significant bleeding, severe infection, a serious heart or lung problem, or very abnormal blood sugar can cause sudden or intense fatigue, usually with other symptoms.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if fatigue occurs with:

Seek same-day medical care for sudden severe fatigue with a high fever, repeated vomiting, inability to keep fluids down, black or bloody stools, vomiting blood, or unusually heavy bleeding. Also seek prompt care if you have severe dizziness, very little urine, or a rapidly worsening illness.

Book a routine appointment if fatigue lasts several weeks, keeps returning, is getting worse, or limits work, school, exercise, or self-care. Arrange an appointment sooner if it comes with unexplained weight loss, persistent fever, night sweats, swollen glands, shortness of breath, unusual thirst or urination, or a major change in mood.

- Chest pain or severe difficulty breathing
- Fainting, new confusion, or difficulty waking
- New weakness or numbness on one side
- Thoughts of suicide or immediate danger from self-harm

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the fatigue began, how it affects you, and whether sleep or rest helps. They may ask about snoring, pauses in breathing during sleep, recent infections, stress, mood, menstrual or other bleeding, diet, alcohol, medicines, and drug use.

An examination may include checking your heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, temperature, and signs of anemia or thyroid disease. Your sleep, mental health, and daily activity pattern are also important parts of the assessment.

Tests are chosen according to your symptoms and history. Blood tests may check for anemia, thyroid problems, diabetes, inflammation, or liver and kidney conditions. Not everyone needs extensive testing, and normal test results do not mean that the fatigue is not real.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. This may involve treating an infection or health condition, improving sleep, addressing anxiety or depression, or reviewing a medicine that may be contributing.

While arranging care or recovering from a short-term cause, it may help to:

Avoid pushing through severe fatigue. If activity causes a delayed and lasting worsening of symptoms, reduce the intensity and discuss this pattern with a healthcare professional.

Do not begin iron, vitamin, hormone, or stimulant treatment just because you feel tired. These treatments may not help unless there is a specific deficiency or condition, and some can cause harm or interfere with tests.

- Keep regular sleep and wake times
- Eat regular meals and drink enough fluid
- Limit alcohol and avoid relying on energy drinks
- Balance activity with planned breaks
- Increase activity gradually if it does not worsen symptoms
- Record fatigue, sleep, activity, and other symptoms

What to expect

Fatigue from poor sleep, stress, or a minor illness often improves as the underlying issue settles. Recovery may be gradual rather than immediate.

Persistent fatigue may take time to assess because sleep, physical health, mental health, medicines, and daily demands can overlap. Follow-up is important if symptoms continue, change, or new symptoms appear. Keeping brief notes about patterns and triggers can make follow-up more useful.

Common questions

Does fatigue mean something serious?

Usually not. Common causes include poor sleep, stress, and recovery from illness. Ongoing, unexplained, or worsening fatigue should still be assessed because some treatable medical conditions can cause it.

Should I exercise when I feel fatigued?

Gentle, gradual activity may help when fatigue is related to inactivity or recovery from a minor illness. Stop and seek advice if exercise causes chest pain, faintness, severe breathlessness, or a prolonged worsening of symptoms.

Will a blood test find the cause?

Blood tests can identify some causes, such as anemia or thyroid problems, but they do not explain every case. Sleep, mood, medicines, infections, pain, and activity patterns may be just as important.

Is fatigue the same as chronic fatigue syndrome?

No. Fatigue is a symptom with many possible causes. ME/CFS is a specific long-term illness with additional features, including reduced ability to function and worsening after physical or mental effort.

Sources

- MedlinePlus: Fatigue , US National Library of Medicine
- NHS: Tiredness and fatigue , National Health Service
- Fatigue in Adults: Evaluation and Management , American Family Physician , 2023
- ME/CFS Signs and Symptoms , US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Myalgic encephalomyelitis or chronic fatigue syndrome: diagnosis and management , NICE guideline NG206, 2021