SYMPTOM

Weakness

Weakness is a reduced ability to move or use part or all of your body.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Muscles lack their usual power during movement

WHERE IT IS FELT
One area, one side, or the whole body

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Poor sleep, recent illness, physical deconditioning

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Sudden one-sided weakness or weakness affecting breathing or swallowing

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to months, depending on the underlying cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persistent, recurring, worsening, or activity-limiting weakness

Overview

Weakness can mean that your muscles cannot produce their usual strength. You might struggle to lift an arm, climb stairs, grip an object, or stand from a chair.

People also use "weakness" to describe tiredness, low energy, or feeling faint. These sensations are different from a measurable loss of muscle strength, although they can happen together. Telling them apart can help a healthcare professional narrow down the cause.

Weakness may affect your whole body, one side, one limb, or a small group of muscles. It may begin suddenly or develop gradually. Weakness is a symptom, not a diagnosis, and it has many possible causes.

What it may feel or look like

You may notice that ordinary movements require more effort or that a body part does not move as expected. Examples include:

Pain, stiffness, poor balance, breathlessness, or fear of falling can also limit movement without reducing muscle strength. Numbness or tingling may occur with weakness when nerves are

involved.

Keep track of when the problem began, which areas are affected, and whether it is constant or comes and goes.

- Dropping objects or having trouble opening containers
- Difficulty raising your arms, brushing your hair, or reaching overhead
- Trouble climbing stairs or standing without using your arms
- A foot dragging, an unsteady walk, or repeated falls
- One side of your face or body moving less than the other

Common causes

Common causes include physical overexertion, poor sleep, and recovery from an infection. Muscles can also lose strength after inactivity, bed rest, or reduced activity because of an injury. This is called deconditioning.

Not eating enough, dehydration, and significant emotional stress may create a general feeling of weakness or low energy. Some medicines can contribute, including medicines that cause drowsiness or affect muscles, nerves, blood pressure, or body salts. Do not stop a prescribed medicine without medical advice.

Less common causes include anemia, which is a shortage of healthy red blood cells, and problems involving the thyroid, kidneys, liver, or levels of minerals such as potassium. Joint disease, persistent pain, and heart or lung conditions may make activity feel harder.

Disorders of the brain, spinal cord, nerves, or muscles can cause true loss of strength. The pattern often gives clues. For example, a nerve problem may affect one hand or foot, while some muscle conditions mainly affect the shoulders and hips.

Urgent causes include stroke, pressure on the spinal cord, and rapidly developing nerve or muscle disorders. These are less common, but prompt assessment matters when weakness appears suddenly or progresses quickly.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services now if weakness:

Do not drive yourself if sudden weakness could make driving unsafe. Note when the symptoms began, because timing can affect emergency treatment.

Seek same-day medical advice for weakness that is new and worsening over hours or days, spreads to other areas, or causes repeated falls. Fever, severe back pain, persistent vomiting, or marked drowsiness alongside weakness also needs prompt assessment.

Book a routine appointment if weakness lasts, keeps returning, limits daily activities, or began after starting or changing a medicine. Gradual unexplained muscle loss should also be checked.

- Starts suddenly, especially on one side of the face or body
- Occurs with trouble speaking, confusion, vision loss, or a severe new headache
- Affects breathing, swallowing, or the ability to hold up your head
- Follows a serious head, neck, or back injury
- Occurs with new loss of bladder or bowel control or numbness around the groin
- Comes with fainting, severe chest pain, or inability to stand or walk

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask what you mean by weakness and whether the main problem is loss of strength, tiredness, pain, poor balance, or breathlessness. They may ask about infections, injuries, medicines, alcohol use, eating patterns, and other symptoms.

An examination may compare strength on both sides of your body. It can also assess reflexes, sensation, coordination, walking, joints, and muscle size.

Tests depend on the pattern and your other symptoms. Blood tests may check blood cells, thyroid function, kidney or liver function, body salts, inflammation, or signs of muscle injury. Some people need imaging of the brain or spine. Nerve conduction studies and electromyography can test how nerves and muscles carry electrical signals. Not everyone needs all these tests.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. It may involve treating an infection or medical condition, reviewing medicines, correcting a nutritional or mineral problem, or using physiotherapy to rebuild movement and strength. Sudden neurological weakness may require emergency treatment.

If the weakness is mild and follows overexertion or a short illness, rest, regular meals, and enough fluids may help. Return to activity gradually rather than pushing through marked

weakness.

Reduce the risk of falls by keeping walkways clear, using handrails, and asking for help with unsafe tasks. Avoid driving, climbing ladders, or using dangerous equipment if your grip, leg strength, or alertness is reduced.

Do not begin strenuous exercise when weakness is unexplained, rapidly worsening, or accompanied by urgent symptoms.

What to expect

Weakness related to exertion or a brief illness often improves as the body recovers. Strength lost through inactivity usually returns gradually with safe, regular movement.

Other causes may need ongoing treatment or rehabilitation. Recovery can depend on how quickly the weakness developed, which body areas are involved, and the underlying condition. Follow up if symptoms do not improve as expected or if a new area becomes weak.

Common questions

Is weakness the same as fatigue?

No. Fatigue is a lack of energy or a strong need to rest. Muscle weakness means reduced power during movement. They can occur together, and the difference is not always obvious without an examination.

Can anxiety make me feel weak?

Anxiety can cause trembling, light-headedness, fast breathing, and a sense that your legs or whole body feel weak. New, persistent, or clearly one-sided loss of strength should not automatically be attributed to anxiety.

Should I exercise when I feel weak?

Gentle activity may help after mild illness or inactivity, provided you can move safely and symptoms are improving. Stop and seek advice if activity causes chest pain, faintness, severe breathlessness, or worsening weakness.

What information should I bring to an appointment?

Note when the weakness began, the affected areas, what makes it better or worse, and any pain, numbness, fever, weight change, or recent illness. Bring an up-to-date list of medicines and supplements.

Sources

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