

Understanding fatigue

Fatigue is generally defined as a feeling of lack of energy and motivation that can be physical, mental or both. It is when your body is exhausted and is not able to function as effectively as it would normally. Fatigue is not the same as tiredness, but the desire to sleep may accompany fatigue.

Fatigue can be caused by many different factors. It may be as a result of long period of physical exertion with little or no downtime. It can result from stress, bereavement, anxiety, eating disorders and major events such as moving home, relationship breakdown or experiencing a traumatic situation.

What causes fatigue?

Fatigue can be triggered by a wide range of issues. These commonly fall into one of the following categories:

- ◆ **Unhealthy lifestyle** – having a poor sleep routine, having a poor diet, having insufficient exercise and activity, overstimulation through caffeine, alcohol or other substances
- ◆ **Specific situations/events** – following a major event such as a natural disaster, a home removal, or a relationship breakdown/divorce
- ◆ **Work-related** – poor work conditions such as workplace conflict, bullying, threats to job security as well as shift work, extended work hours or high workload, constant change and working long periods under high concentration
- ◆ **Psychological** – experiencing depression, anxiety, stress or dealing with grief, loss and bereavement
- ◆ **Health conditions** – experiencing health or medical conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, thyroid disorder, and eating disorders

Regardless of the cause of fatigue, anyone who experiences fatigue over an extended period should consult with a medical professional.

What are the safety concerns of fatigue?

Fatigue plays a critical role in the safety of individuals. It increases the risk of injuries and accidents. It is a known risk factor in motor vehicle accidents, it reduces alertness and concentration and impairs decision making in a wide range of situations.

To put the safety risk into context, being awake for a total of 17 hours has the equivalent effect on performance of a blood alcohol content of 0.05. Being awake for 20 hours has the equivalent effect on performance of a blood alcohol content of 0.1.

What are the signs of fatigue?

Fatigue can cause a wide range of physical, mental and emotional symptoms. These include:

- ◆ Chronic tiredness or sleepiness
- ◆ Headaches
- ◆ Dizziness
- ◆ Impaired judgement and decision-making
- ◆ Impaired hand-to-eye coordination
- ◆ Blurring of vision
- ◆ Hallucinations
- ◆ Confusion or forgetfulness
- ◆ Reduced immune system function
- ◆ Sore or aching muscles
- ◆ Muscle weakness
- ◆ Slower reflexes and responses
- ◆ Loss of appetite
- ◆ Moodiness or irritability
- ◆ Low motivation
- ◆ Reduced concentration
- ◆ Short-term memory problems
- ◆ Poor quality sleep

What can be done to reduce fatigue?

It is important to understand that fatigue is not a condition. It is a symptom and the only way to reduce fatigue is to understand the underlying causes. There are however a few things you can do:

- ◆ **Build a good sleep routine** – avoid sleeping during the day, remove electronic devices from your bedroom, establish a regular pattern of sleep time and wake time
- ◆ **Stay hydrated** – insufficient water can cause you to experience periods of fatigue and low energy as your body tries to function without sufficient water
- ◆ **Exercise** – while it might feel counter-intuitive, exercise helps your body to produce endorphins which can elevate both your energy and your mood
- ◆ **Beware of stimulants** – alcohol and caffeine are stimulants and may have a negative impact on your sleep. Caffeine early in the day may be ok but try to limit it in the evening. Alcohol may help you to fall asleep quickly but will reduce the quality of your sleep
- ◆ **Maintain a nutritious diet** – maintain a healthy balance of fresh fruit, vegetables, proteins and grains and avoid the high sugar, high carbohydrate and high saturated fat options