

Fatigue Fighting Tips

Fatigue is a feeling that you're chronically tired – mentally and physically. It can be caused by a number of factors, including unhealthy lifestyle choices, workplace problems and stress. There are many different ways you can boost your energy. See your health practitioner first to make sure you don't have an underlying medical problem.

Energy explained

Food, which gives us energy, is broken down by the digestive system. Some elements, such as water and glucose, are absorbed through the stomach. The rest are absorbed through the small intestine.

The body's preferred energy source is glucose, from carbohydrates, but it can also use fatty acids (from fats) and amino acids (from proteins). Glucose is delivered to virtually every cell in the body by the bloodstream, and is then burned with oxygen to produce energy. Hormones control every step in this process; for example, the pancreas makes the hormone insulin, which helps to control blood sugar levels.

Dietary suggestions

If you want more energy, look at your diet and make sure you're following these basic guidelines:

- **Drink lots of water.** A dehydrated body functions less efficiently.
- **Be careful with caffeine.** 1 or 2 caffeinated drinks per day like coffee, tea or cola can boost your energy and mental alertness, but more than 6 caffeinated drinks per day may make you anxious, irritable, and negatively affect your performance.
- **Eat breakfast.** Food boosts your metabolism and gives your body energy to burn. The brain relies on glucose for fuel, so choose carbohydrate-rich breakfast foods such as cereals or whole grain bread. See the tip sheet *Breakfast Does a Body Good*.
- **Don't skip meals.** Going without food for too long allows blood sugar levels to dip. Try to eat regularly to maintain your energy levels throughout the day.
- **Don't crash diet** Low calorie diets or diets that severely restrict carbohydrates don't contain enough energy for your body's needs. The typical crash diet also deprives the body of nutrients such as vitamins, minerals and trace elements.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Increase the amount of fruit, vegetables, whole grain foods, low fat dairy products and lean meats in your diet. Reduce the amount of high fat, high sugar and high salt foods.
- **Don't overeat.** Large meals can drain your energy. Instead of eating 3 big meals per day, try eating 6 mini-meals to spread your calorie intake more evenly. This will result in more constant blood sugar and insulin levels. You'll also find it easier to lose excess body fat.
- **Eat iron rich foods.** Women in particular are prone to iron-deficiency (anemia). Make sure your diet includes iron rich foods such as lean red meat.

Sleep suggestions

A common cause of fatigue is not enough sleep, or poor quality sleep. Suggestions include:

- **Get enough sleep.** Adults need about 8 hours per night.
- **Limit caffeine.** Too much caffeine, especially in the evening, can cause insomnia. Limit caffeinated drinks to 5 or fewer per day, and avoid these types of drinks after dinner.
- **Learn how to relax.** A common cause of insomnia is fretting while lying in bed. Experiment with different relaxation techniques until you find one or two that work for you; for example, you could think of a restful scene, focus on your breathing, or silently repeat a mantra or phrase.
- **Avoid sleeping pills.** Sleeping pills don't work in the long term because they don't address the causes of insomnia.

Lifestyle suggestions

- **Don't smoke.** Cigarette smoke contains many harmful substances. There are many reasons why smokers typically have lower energy than non-smokers. For example, the body needs to combine glucose with oxygen to make energy, but carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke reduces the amount of oxygen available.
- **Increase physical activity.** Physical activity boosts energy levels, while a sedentary lifestyle is known to cause fatigue. Being active has many healthy effects on the body and mind. It reduces blood pressure, helps to maintain a healthy weight, and is an effective treatment for depression and anxiety. A good bout of exercise also helps you sleep better at night.
- **Limit the time you sit down.** Reduce sedentary behaviours such as watching television and using computers.
- **Seek advice.** If you haven't exercised in a long time, are obese, are over age 40 or have a chronic medical condition, seek advice from your doctor or health practitioner regarding small steps you can take towards a more active lifestyle.
- **Seek treatment for substance abuse if you need it.** Excessive alcohol consumption or recreational drug use contributes to fatigue. It's also potentially dangerous.
- **Workplace issues.** Demanding jobs, conflicts at work and burnout are common causes of fatigue. Take steps to address your work problems. A good place to start is to talk with your human resources officer.

Psychological issues

Studies suggest that between 50 and 80% of fatigue cases are mainly due to psychological factors. Suggestions include:

- **Assess your lifestyle.** Are you putting yourself under unnecessary stress? Are there ongoing problems in your life that may be causing prolonged anxiety or depression? It may help to seek professional counselling to work out family, career or personal issues.
- **Relaxation training.** Constant anxiety drains the body of energy and can lead to burnout. Relaxation techniques, such as meditation and yoga, help to 'switch off' adrenaline and allow your body and mind to recover.
- **Learn to do nothing.** A hectic lifestyle is exhausting. Try to carve out a few more hours in your week to simply relax and hang out. If you can't find a few more hours, it may be time to rethink your priorities and commitments.
- **Have more fun.** Are you so preoccupied with commitments and pressures that you don't give yourself enough time for fun? Laughter is one of the best energy boosters around.

Coping with the mid-afternoon energy slump

Most people feel drowsy after lunch. This mid-afternoon drop in energy levels is linked to the brain's circadian rhythm and is 'hard wired' into the human body. Prevention may be impossible, but there are ways to reduce the slump, including:

- Introducing fatigue fighting suggestions (above) into your lifestyle. A fit, healthy and well-rested body is less prone to severe drowsiness in the afternoon.
- Eating a combination of protein and carbohydrates – like a tuna sandwich – for lunch. Carbohydrates provide glucose for energy, and protein provides the amino acid tyrosine, which allows the brain to synthesize the neurotransmitters dopamine and norepinephrine to keep your mind attentive and alert.
- Get moving! A brisk walk or even 10 minutes of stretching at your desk can improve your blood flow and boost your energy.