

Fatigue

There are numerous causes of fatigue that range from lifestyle to physiological. For example, a person may be fatigued because he or she is drinking too much caffeine or not getting enough sleep or he or she may have fatigue because of diabetes or low thyroid hormone production. When fatigue lasts longer than a month and has interfered with a person's daily living without an obvious cause that person should have an evaluation by a physician.

Workup for fatigue usually takes two physician appointments. The first will involve a history, exam, and blood draws. The second occurs 2-4 days later at which blood tests are reviewed and treatment initiated. More often than not no blood abnormalities are found. Usually treating the symptoms with lifestyle change is the preferred way to treat idiopathic fatigue (fatigue without a lab abnormality to treat). Very rarely medications can be used to help. Medications that help with fatigue have side effects that are often worse than the fatigue itself.

In general, I recommend the following lifestyle changes in everyone with fatigue in order of importance:

1. **EXERCISE REGULARLY.** It is preferable to exercise every day to release natural hormones that improve energy, strengthen muscle, and improve stamina. If you can't do that, get out at least 3 times a week. Cardiovascular exercise like walking, running, swimming, or biking is best for at least 20 minutes an episode. Adding weight training once or twice a week can also be beneficial.
2. **GET RID OF JUNK FOOD.** Simple carbohydrates (Foods that are processed quickly like white bread or noodles and sweets) get metabolized very rapidly leaving a low glucose level in the blood 1-2 hours after eating. They also cause weight gain. Instead choose whole grain foods and fruits and vegetables. Meats are ok but should be eaten no more than once a day. When eating meat choose fish over other types and eat red meats rarely.
3. **GET REGULAR SLEEP.** The total amount of sleep often is not as important as the pattern. Try and get to sleep and wake up at roughly the same time every day. Avoid naps unless you can take them daily and then try and take them for the same amount of time at the same time every day. Some people feel good with just six or seven hours of sleep a night. Other people may need eight to ten. You should be able to tell how much you need after 1-2 weeks of a regular schedule.
4. **GET SOME SUN.** While we do not want sun bums and need to cover up with sunscreen, daily exposure to bright light as from the sun has been shown to improve mood.
5. **TAKE A MULTIVITAMIN.** In the USA we have great varieties of food to eat every day. Vitamin deficiencies are rare here. Nonetheless, it is possible that your food preference could make it so that you have low levels of some essential vitamins that may not even be detected with lab work. To prevent this, a good multivitamin such as Centrum or One-a-day can help. Omega 3 fatty acid (fish oil) capsules taken 1 or 2 every night may also help.

6. **TREAT DEPRESSION.** This is a very common cause of fatigue and if you don't get it treated fatigue will not get better. If you are sad more than you used to be or if you can't sleep or are losing or gaining weight ask to get screened for depression.
7. **USE YOUR BRAIN.** Keeping your brain active by reading every day or doing a crossword can give it and your body energy.
8. **AVOID QUICK FIXES.** While caffeine and herbs can temporarily improve your energy they typically cause rebound fatigue and are not useful in the long run. If you think caffeine is needed, ask us first before long term usage.

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