



## Understanding and managing fatigue

It is common for people with arthritis to experience high levels of fatigue – characterised by extreme tiredness and exhaustion. In this article we'll explain what fatigue is, what causes it, and how you can manage it.

### What is fatigue?

Fatigue is a feeling of weariness, but it's more extreme than simple tiredness. It can affect you physically, making your limbs seem heavy and causing you to feel exhausted, but it can also affect your concentration and motivation. People who experience fatigue may find they struggle to do even small tasks. It often comes on for no clear reason and without warning.

Most of us feel tired after a long day, but people with a long-term medical condition such as arthritis can experience a tiredness that's quite different in quality and intensity and which doesn't always improve after rest. Fatigue can affect people with any type of arthritis, but it's more common if you have one of the following conditions:

- Inflammatory arthritis – for example, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis and ankylosing spondylitis
- Autoimmune diseases – for example, lupus, Behcet's syndrome, scleroderma and Sjogren's syndrome
- Fibromyalgia.

Fatigue can have a major impact on your life. It can force you to stop what you're doing and rest, or make you change your plans. This can have a big effect on your ability to run your life or do the things that we all take for granted. When fatigue is severe, it can lead to feelings of complete exhaustion, or 'wipe-out', when you have to sit or lie down to try to recover. This may be made worse by a lack of understanding from others about how much it affects you.

### What causes it?

Many things may combine to cause fatigue, including the following:

- Active disease – Inflammation in the joints and other tissues can cause fatigue in people with inflammatory arthritis and autoimmune disease. Chemicals called cytokines, which are found in inflamed tissues, are similar to chemicals released in viral illnesses such as colds and flu, and they can cause extreme fatigue
- Anaemia, which is often found with inflammation
- Other long-term conditions such as diabetes or thyroid disease
- Some drugs used to treat arthritis, which may cause drowsiness or loss of concentration
- Pain, especially if it's long-term can wear you down

# Fatigue is extreme physical and mental tiredness. It affects most people with arthritis at some point

- Weak muscles (caused, for example, by inactivity due to pain), which mean you have to use more energy to do everyday tasks
- Overdoing things or carrying on with activities for too long
- Sleep disturbance as a result of pain, late nights or sleeping too much during the day
- Stress and anxiety
- Low mood or depression
- Poor diet or hunger.

## How can I help myself?

Try the following tips to help reduce the impact that fatigue has on your life:

- Talk to your GP or rheumatology team about getting support or a review of your drug treatment
- Use the four 'P's' – problem solving, planning, prioritising and pacing – to monitor what activities increase your fatigue so you can save some energy for things you enjoy. Set goals to achieve these. The four P's are covered in more detail in the following section
- Talk with family, friends and colleagues so they understand what fatigue is and can help you when you need it
- Learn to say no to invitations that are likely to cause fatigue or make your level of fatigue worse
- Gradually increase the amount of physical activity or exercise you do to improve your general well-being, strength and energy levels
- Deal with stress or anxiety by tackling problems and trying relaxation techniques
- Get help with low mood
- Join a self-help or support group to share experiences
- Get a good night's sleep by improving your sleeping habits and patterns
- Eat a healthy diet to improve your general well-being and reduce the chances of sudden episodes of fatigue caused by hunger.

## Using the four 'P's' – problem solving, planning, Prioritizing and pacing

When people feel fatigued, they often spend their energy on work or chores and give up things that they enjoy. Use the four 'P's' to help you to conserve your energy, work out what's important to you, and give you time for things you want to do:

**Problem solving:** Often it's not what you do, it's the way that you do it that makes a difference. Look at your daily routine. Start to notice if you spend all morning doing the same type of repetitive task or if your working position causes you pain or discomfort. Perhaps your body complains when you do certain tasks or you get very tired by the afternoon. If a task causes you a problem, ask yourself how you can do it differently.

**Planning:** Make a plan of the things you want to achieve during the day or over the week. Plan how and when you're going to do certain tasks, and spread them out wherever possible over a number of days. Make sure that demanding jobs are spaced out during each day or week.

**Prioritising:** If you list the tasks you need to do, you can put them in order of importance and decide what tasks you can remove, delay or hand-over. Ask yourself the following:

- Does this need to be done today?
- Does it need to be done at all?
- Do I have to do it, or can someone else?
- Can I get someone to help me with parts of the task?

**Pacing:** Break tasks down into achievable parts and spread them throughout the day or week, and take short, regular rest breaks. Change your position and activity regularly. Don't use exhaustion as a guide for when to stop; change your task or rest before you start to feel tired.

## Make sure you set time for doing things that make you feel good

You may have found that fatigue has stopped you doing things you really want to, so it's worth spending some time thinking what you could achieve that would make you feel good – for example, socialising with friends or getting back into a hobby. Setting yourself small, weekly goals can help you build up to what you really want to do as you start managing your fatigue. You're much more likely to meet small, specific goals than vague ones or ones that aim too high. Your occupational therapist or rheumatology nurse specialist may be able to help you set and review goals.

Source:

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