

Choices



Fatigue



Read me...

Fatigue

Fatigue is one of the most common invisible symptoms of MS and one which can have a major impact on all aspects of life. For some people it is the symptom that affects them the most.

It varies greatly from one person to the next. It can come and go and be triggered by a number of things. It may be a first symptom of MS or a symptom that starts much later on after diagnosis.

Fatigue is often a symptom that people find difficult to explain. It isn't like the general feeling of being tired -- it is an overwhelming feeling of exhaustion often for no apparent reason. It can interfere with day to day activities and can prevent the individual from doing or completing tasks.

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is a symptom that is experienced by many people with MS at some time. The ability to carry out physical activities and the ability to concentrate or think may both be affected.

It is much more than just feeling tired. It is described by people in many ways such as exhausting, overwhelming sleepiness and weakness.

Fatigue can arrive without warning and can subside just as fast.

Fatigue can differ very much from person to person. It can often worsen existing

symptoms or can bring on new ones. Some people find that fatigue can make limbs feel heavy and grip more difficult. Things like concentration, vision and speech can temporarily worsen.

There are certain things which can bring on fatigue. When you know what these things are for you, fatigue is easier to either deal with or avoid completely. Some of the most common triggers are: a hot day, humid weather, a hot bath, over-exertion, over-tiredness, a heavy meal, smoking and stress. Fatigue can also be one of the major symptoms of a food allergy.

What causes fatigue?

Fatigue in MS is thought to be caused by many factors. There are two distinct types of fatigue: primary and secondary.

Primary fatigue is thought to be down to the disease process itself and is caused by the demyelination in the central nervous system. The slowing of messages from the brain and spinal cord and a build-up of muscle weakness combined, can be a cause of primary fatigue.

Secondary fatigue is not directly caused by MS itself, but where the body tries to compensate for the symptoms caused by MS. For example, sleep disturbance can be common due to spasms, pain or bladder problems. This will contribute to MS related fatigue. Side effects from medications, stress, depression and other symptoms can all cause secondary fatigue.

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Treatment for fatigue

It is important to find out the best way of managing fatigue. To do this you need to find out what triggers it and how to understand it. It may be caused by another symptom which could be easily treatable or it may be about learning how to conserve energy for times of the day when more is needed and prioritising daily activities.

Be aware of your own symptoms and ones that could possibly be a trigger. This will be important in finding the best way to manage your fatigue. For example, if bladder problems at night are disturbing your sleep, then make an appointment to see your GP, MS Nurse or Continence Advisor. This can be assessed and treated.

MS Nurses and MS Specialist Occupational Therapists can help in your fatigue management. Some run their own fatigue-management courses that will teach you strategies and ways to help reduce the fatigue and deal with day to day activities. Something as simple as prioritising daily tasks can make such a difference.

It is very important to listen to your body. If you need to rest, then rest. If you know you have a really busy day coming up - a day out, a wedding or something that is going to take a lot of energy, then make sure you rest well for a couple of days leading up to it.

Don't be tempted to overdo it when you have a really good day. You may well end

up making yourself feel a lot worse for a few days after. It is important to pace yourself and rest when you can.

Learn how to conserve your energy for times when you need it most. Once you start implementing this into daily life it will become much easier. It could be useful to keep a diary taking into account the daily activities done that day; what you have eaten, the time of day you might have felt more tired and anything else that could possibly be a trigger.

Exercise

If you are physically fit, you have a better chance of withstanding fatigue. You should never exercise to the point of exhaustion and should stop before feeling tired or hot. After a session at the gym, a walk, doing yoga or swimming you should have more energy, not less. Your body will give you early warning signals as to when it is time to stop and rest.

The National Institution for Care Excellence (NICE) published guidelines in October 2014 for the management of multiple sclerosis. In these guidelines NICE advised aerobic, balance and stretching exercises including yoga may be helpful in treating MS-related fatigue.

Mindfulness

In NICE's October 2014 guidelines, NICE advised that mindfulness can be used for treating MS-related fatigue.

Mindfulness is a meditative approach connecting the mind and the body. It is

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about paying attention to the moment, and being aware of thoughts and feelings so as not to become overwhelmed with them.

Mindfulness reduces stress and anxiety. Many studies have shown that brain wave activity is changed when a person undergoes mindfulness training – increasing positive emotions and reducing depression.

Mindfulness is usually taught in a weekly class over a period of a few months.

Online courses and CDs guiding a learner through mindfulness training are available. For more information on mindfulness, go to the 'Be Mindful' website at www.bemindful.co.uk.

Your GP may also know of courses run in your local area.

Heat and humidity

A common experience with MS is to become very sensitive to heat, particularly humid heat. Hot, humid summers can be very uncomfortable for someone with MS.

It is important to keep cool. Air conditioning can be very nice but if that isn't available then a fan in every room is a second best. Items such as Kool-Ties and Cooling Vests can be helpful. The Kool-Ties work for up to three days by cooling the whole body and particularly the blood flowing to the carotid arteries.

Cooling Vests have special cooling crystals incorporated into the material and are soaked in cold water, holding the temperature for a substantial period of time.

Where you choose to go for your holiday may need to be more carefully thought about. It may be better to go on holiday off-season, when it is not too hot.

A hot bath can sometimes bring on MS symptoms very rapidly, as well as leaving you feeling weak. These symptoms tend to go away once the effects of the hot bath have worn off. A cool bath or shower will be a much better option.

Drug therapies

Amantadine

A GP can prescribe amantadine for fatigue. It is an antiviral medication which can improve muscle control and reduce muscle stiffness.

As with many drugs, the effectiveness of amantadine in dealing with MS fatigue was a chance discovery. It came about when a number of people with MS were being treated with Amantadine for flu symptoms and it was found that their fatigue levels improved.

It is generally well tolerated by people with MS but it can cause insomnia, nausea, dizziness, loss of appetite, and dryness of the mouth.

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Supplements

B12

The National Institution for Care Excellence (NICE) published guidelines in October 2014 for the management of multiple sclerosis. In these guidelines B12 injections were not recommended in the treatment of fatigue. Although anecdotal evidence also shows that some people with MS may benefit from taking vitamin B12.

Carnitine

Acetyl-L-carnitine is a form of L-carnitine, an amino acid that is found in nearly all cells of the body. L-carnitine plays a critical role in the production of energy from long-chain fatty acids. In addition, it increases the activity of certain nerve cells in the central nervous system. Some research has shown a decrease in fatigue in MS, although more study is needed.

Other vitamins and minerals

People with MS affected by fatigue may benefit from taking magnesium and co-enzyme Q10 beneficial, although there is a lack of research in this area.

If you are considering taking supplements, please discuss this with your GP or neurologist to ensure they are right for you.

Diet

Fatigue can often occur straight after a meal. This is caused by a temporary spike in blood sugar as the food is digested. Carbohydrates in food, such as sugars and starches, are broken down in the gut and enter the blood as glucose, either to be used by the body for energy, growth or repair. Excess glucose is stored as fat.

The key to avoiding fatigue after a meal is to choose slow-acting carbohydrates, also known as carbohydrates with a low Glycaemic Index, or GI.

There is lots of information on the internet, and many books on low GI foods, but the general theme is to choose complex carbohydrates that release sugar slowly such as beans, pulses such as lentils, oats, basmati rice, wholegrain foods, and other high fibre foods.

It is also important never allow yourself to go hungry. Aim to keep your blood sugar balance stable. The worst thing you can do when you're hungry is to eat something very high in carbohydrates and sugar. This makes your blood sugar level spike, but then drop very rapidly, leaving you feeling fatigued soon after.

Fatigue and lack of energy may also be a major symptom of food sensitivity. It would be advisable to consider a food allergy test to rule out any particular foods that may contribute to your fatigue. For information on ELISA food testing – contact MS-UK on 01206 226500.

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Further reading

Exercise

www.ms-uk.org/choiceslife

Diet and nutrition

www.ms-uk.org/choiceslife

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How we create our Choices leaflets

MS-UK believes we must listen to the voices of people affected by multiple sclerosis to shape the information and support we provide. It is these people that bring us perspectives that no one else can give.

For every Choices leaflet we produce, MS-UK consults the wider MS community to gather feedback, and uses this to inform content. All of our Choices leaflets are then reviewed by the MS-UK Virtual Insight Panel before they are published.

Thank you to everyone affected by MS who made this leaflet possible.

Sources

- None cited

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Date: October 2014
Registered Charity Number: 1033731

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