

Managing fatigue with occupational therapy

This factsheet is for guidance only and has been produced with assistance from healthcare professionals

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is a common symptom experienced by people with a variety of illnesses including cancer, heart failure and chronic respiratory conditions.

Fatigue is feeling excessively tired or exhausted all or most of the time and it is not relieved by rest. It can be one of the most disruptive and distressing symptoms as it prevents people leading their normal lives, it affects the wider family too and it can be a constant reminder of someone's illness.

Due to its complex nature, the severity of its impact is often misunderstood by others and it may be interpreted that the individual is lazy, putting it on, not trying or has given up.

There may be many contributing factors causing fatigue and it affects everyone differently.

It may affect people in a way they are not expecting such as difficulty remembering things, a lack of concentration, shortness of breath and difficulty in sleeping as well as feeling excessively tired.

It may be **worth mentioning fatigue to your doctor if you haven't done so already** to explore any medical strategies that may help.

Fatigue is a symptom that needs managing just the same as other symptoms such as pain and this information sheet sets out to offer some practical ideas to manage and monitor levels of fatigue to enable people to learn to live with it and lessen its impact on their lives.

How can occupational therapy help?

Often fatigue cannot be cured completely but management techniques can be used to reduce the impact it has on day to day living.

Occupational therapists are professionals who look at physical, psychological, environmental and social issues that are important to a person. They work with individuals to enable them to achieve autonomy within the limits of their illness. They can help people manage their fatigue in a variety of ways.

Suggestions include different ways to tackle everyday tasks to conserve energy, advice about equipment and adaptations in the home alongside relaxation and anxiety management strategies.

Energy conservation

This means using the energy you do have wisely and efficiently so you can do things that are important to you.

Learning to **prioritise and plan** will help. Noting when energy levels are better and planning activities around those times as well as spreading activities through the week may be useful.

Identify which activities are important for you to do and which may be delegated. Be gentle with yourself and **give yourself permission** not to do unnecessary tasks. **Be comfortable** about saying 'no' to things that will worsen your fatigue. Start to accept help when it is offered, where you feel comfortable.

On the next page are a few practical suggestions for helping to manage your fatigue:

Pacing and practical help

- Alternating heavy tasks with lighter ones and taking frequent rests may help.
- Sit where possible and avoid unnecessary bending.
- Adaptive equipment such as a long-handled shoe horn, a perching stool, a wheelchair and a shower chair may be useful.
- Raising the height of a chair, bed and toilet seat may make it easier for you to get on and off it.
- Avoid rushing, especially on the stairs, and consider whether extra stair rails may be useful.
- Energy saving devices such as an electric tin opener, an electric toothbrush or a microwave oven may help you use less energy than their conventional counterparts.
- Consider practical alternatives, for example using a toweling robe after bathing rather than rubbing yourself dry with a towel.

You may be entitled to other forms of help such as a care package, a Blue Badge to assist with parking and financial assistance – ask a Social Worker/GP about how they can assist.

Diet

Diet can greatly influence energy levels. Eating foods such as complex carbohydrates (for example, whole meal bread and brown rice), fresh fruit and vegetables can optimise energy levels. Drink plenty of fluids but avoid sugary drinks. If you find meal planning and preparation tiring, consider using convenience or pre-cooked meals. These are available from major supermarkets or may be delivered to your door by companies such as Oakhouse or Wiltshire Farm Foods. Consider preparing extra dishes when you are feeling less tired and freezing them for future use. A perching stool may be useful so you can sit to prepare and cook meals.

Exercise

Research shows that increasing rest does not improve fatigue and may make it worse. Regular light exercise has been shown to reduce fatigue but if this is difficult, an active daily routine may help, for example getting up and dressing rather than staying in bed, or going up and down stairs are all ways of keeping the body physically active. Physiotherapists may suggest exercises to try and maintain optimum function in the joints and muscles.

Relaxation and rest

Feeling tense and stressed uses up vital energy and can make fatigue worse. Making time for activities that help you relax is important to help you cope with and reduce levels of fatigue.

Learning to relax may be hard but there are many effective techniques including deep breathing, visualisation, muscular relaxation and relaxation CDs. For more details ask your occupational therapist.

Sleep

Quality of sleep, rather than quantity, may affect levels of fatigue. Sleep patterns may be improved by regular light exercise or an active daily routine. Avoiding stimulants and large amounts of alcohol at bedtime may result in better quality of sleep. Other things which may help are having a relaxing environment in which to sleep (such as a dark and quiet room), having a regular wake up time and avoiding napping and sleeping in where possible.

See also LOROS factsheets on;

- Energy conservation
- Relaxation
- Mindfulness

This leaflet is updated regularly. For the most up to date information please visit loros.co.uk/care

In cases of comments or complaints, please contact:

Chief Executive, or Director of Patient Services and Clinical Quality, LOROS, Groby Road, Leicester LE3 9QE
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Alternative languages:

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If you need this information in your own language, please contact the PA to our Patient Experience Lead on 0116 231 8435

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