

Many people without multiple sclerosis (MS) experience fatigue, but MS fatigue differs in that it can significantly disrupt your ability to work and function. Like others, you may find that fatigue is a common part of your MS. Managing fatigue involves maximising and using energy efficiently, by pacing yourself and prioritising tasks. With the right information and support, fatigue can be minimised or managed effectively to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle.

MS and fatigue

What is MS fatigue?

The causes of fatigue in MS are not well understood. Often described as heavy tiredness, general weakness or lack of energy, the symptom is also known for its unforgiving feelings and effect. It can occur of its own, with no stimulus and after relatively mild exertion, such as a short walk.

Unlike ordinary fatigue, MS-related fatigue usually occurs more rapidly, lasts longer and takes longer to recover from. It can be **temporary** such as during a relapse, an infection or unrelated illness, or when starting some MS medications; or **ongoing** (chronic), even after rest.

MS fatigue can temporarily worsen other MS symptoms (such as muscle weakness, vision issues, and difficulties concentrating or making decisions), but reduce again after rest. (Many people living with MS say it's harder to 'think straight' when they're fatigued). Equally, MS fatigue can result from other MS symptoms such as mobility (walking) problems, pain, muscle weakness or depression.

Chronic MS fatigue is frequently present, even when resting. It usually increases in the second part of the day and can be made worse by stress or heat.

What causes fatigue in MS?

Fatigue in MS is thought to result from different factors, partly caused by MS itself (known as **primary fatigue**) and partly by other factors (**secondary fatigue**) that affect people with MS, more than those without the condition.

It's believed that primary fatigue is due to interrupted nerve messages from the brain and spinal cord, damaged by MS. As a result, your body needs more energy to function which leads to a build-up of fatigue. Fatigue is often associated with muscle weakness, which also requires more energy. Heat can also be a factor (fatigue can increase during hot weather, after a hot shower or meal).

Secondary fatigue occurs from the effects of living with MS. For instance, MS symptoms such as depression, pain or sleep disturbance by spasms, or incontinence can all make fatigue worse. Fatigue may also occur as a side effect of some medications or from inactivity, stress, poor diet or an infection. Other medical conditions can also cause or worsen fatigue.

What's different about MS fatigue?

'Ordinary' fatigue can usually be managed by rest and a good night's sleep, which is quite different to the fatigue experienced in MS.

MS fatigue can be physical and/or mental, saps your energy in an instant and stops you from completing tasks. MS fatigue can be debilitating with a longer recovery and can't be 'worked through'.

The overwhelming sense of tiredness of MS fatigue can occur at any time without warning, for no apparent reason or after mild activities such as writing or reading, with an immediate need to rest.

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MS-related fatigue may occur when you wake, in some cases every day, even if you've had a good night's sleep and:

- Tends to worsen as the day progresses
- Appears more easily and suddenly than ordinary fatigue
- Is generally more severe than ordinary fatigue
- Tends to be aggravated by heat and humidity
- Is more likely to interfere with daily activities

Fatigue is one of the challenging invisible symptoms of MS. It's difficult to explain and different to other people's experience with ordinary fatigue, so some hesitate to mention it. Your fatigue can be debilitating and stop you in your tracks but its invisibility means others may not know or understand what you're going through. People can even misinterpret MS fatigue for things like depression, or not pulling your weight, which can be frustrating.

With the right advice, you can manage or reduce fatigue. Like MS itself, MS fatigue varies from person to person, so an individual approach is best.

What should I do if I experience fatigue?

If you have fatigue concerns talk to your MS nurse or GP, and at your next visit, tell your neurologist. A thorough evaluation can help to identify the contributing factors and to develop a management approach, to suit your circumstances.

What can I do to manage this symptom?

It can be useful to learn to recognise the early signs of fatigue and how it affects you. Likewise, talking with family, friends and/or colleagues may help them understand any limitations.

MS fatigue often results from secondary factors, such as co-existing medical conditions, poor diet, lack of fitness or sleep, medication side effects, stress, depression, hormonal changes or heat sensitivity. Identifying any contributing factors, should help you to develop a tailored management plan.

Fatigue management strategies include:

- Maintain a well-balanced diet
- Stay hydrated
- Stay active – exercises to increase your stamina and strength may be useful.
- Monitor sleep patterns and address any issues
- Manage other contributing MS symptoms, such as depression.
- Rest/take breaks
- Vary heavy with lighter tasks – for example, if you have more fatigue in the afternoon, do harder jobs in the morning.

Find ways to conserve your energy. Is there an easier way to do something? Can the job be broken down into smaller tasks? Can you sit rather than stand to do an activity? Review work and home spaces - can they be modified? How and where things are stored, work area heights, furnishing and lighting can all influence the amount of energy required to complete tasks.

Occupational therapists can help with ways to conserve your energy – at home or work – and may be able to suggest assistive devices and other practical tools.

Manage any heat sensitivity. Even the smallest increase in temperature can increase a person's fatigue. Similar to MS fatigue and the need to rest and recover, your body needs to cool down if affected by heat and humidity.

Treatments

Medication may help if used in conjunction with fatigue management strategies, or you may need to review your current treatment program.

Some drugs (for your MS or other conditions) can make fatigue worse. Of the drugs for MS symptoms, those for spasms, stiffness and pain are often associated with an increase in fatigue.

Speak with your healthcare team about tailored options to improve your individual situation.

How can I reduce the impact of fatigue myself?

Managing fatigue involves both trying to keep up energy levels (maximising) and using energy efficiently.

Maximising energy

- **Sleep** - poor sleep is common in MS. Investigate any reasons for poor sleep and develop good sleep habits. Over time this can help improve your energy levels and quality of life.
- **Heat sensitivity** - temperature changes can worsen fatigue but it's usually quickly reversed when you cool down or the temperature drops. Cooling techniques can reduce problems.
- **Mood** - a low mood can drain energy and motivation, and increase fatigue.
- **Stress** - can lead to fatigue, so aim to control or reduce stress and identify the cause.
- **Relaxation** - helps decrease muscle tension, lowers blood pressure and slows your heart rate. Relaxation improves sleep, increases benefit from rest periods and can help ease stressful situations.
- **Diet and nutrition** - A good diet and eating habits provides the required fuel to get through the day. For example, many find that a healthy, well balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables and minimal fat, salt or sugar provides the best energy levels. Being over or underweight can increase fatigue, so a healthy weight is also helpful.
- **Fitness and exercise** – low or no activity increases fatigue. Regularly-used muscles stay strong and provide the energy to do tasks. Some form of daily exercise contributes to a healthy lifestyle.

Using energy effectively

Besides building up energy, managing fatigue also involves using energy effectively, for example:

- **Plan** - think about what you can achieve and don't tackle too much. Plan ahead, balance and mix up activities.
- **Prioritise/delegate** - separate out what needs to be done and what others can do for you.
- **Energy effectiveness strategies** - do tasks in more energy efficient ways.

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- **Pace** - do tasks at a comfortable rate, with enough breaks and rests.

Try different things to find a suitable routine. Saving energy means you can achieve more doing the activities you consider important.

Fatigue and exercise in MS

Many people love to stay active but for those with MS, MS fatigue can make exercise difficult (even problematic), for example:

- You may feel tired when you only exercise in small bursts
- Your legs don't want to work anymore but you don't feel tired
- Exercise makes you more tired

How can I minimise fatigue during exercise?

Start with low-intensity exercise, gradually building up the intensity, frequency and duration.

Before starting a new exercise program, identify and address any secondary factors contributing to your fatigue. Apply cooling strategies to minimise any temperature increase. Choose exercises suitable to your fitness level (and needs) such as:

- **Stretching** - least tiring and very helpful if you experience more fatigue due to spasticity (muscle stiffness). These exercises help loosen muscles, reducing the amount of energy required to move.
- **Strengthening** - can help where muscle weakness causes fatigue, making everyday tasks tiring. These exercises may need more mental effort due to the postural control and skill required, and can be more tiring.
- **Muscle endurance training** - repetitive low-resistance exercises performed to the point of muscle fatigue. Signs of fatigue include a decline in performance, decreased range of movement, and uncomfortable sensation or pain in the muscle. Don't push beyond these signs of fatigue as this can result in a 'conduction block' (a temporary but reversible paralysis), and can strain the supporting tissue. Recovery is longer if you push past this point.
- **Fitness (aerobic)** - most tiring (requires large amounts of oxygen for a sustained period of time) but the most beneficial form of exercise for your heart, lungs and brain function. While the frequency, intensity and duration of physical activity will vary according to your needs, just a small amount of aerobic exercise can increase your fitness.

During exercise, stay hydrated and remember heat can trigger fatigue (whilst exercising). For people living with MS, fever from infections can also raise core body temperature and cause symptoms to worsen. It's best to avoid strenuous exercise if you have an infection, fever or feel unwell.

Information and assistance:

General

There is support available to help you manage your MS:

- **Your MS Nurse or GP** should be the first contact for any new and/or persistent concerns related to fatigue.
- **Your neurologist, MS Nurse or other healthcare provider** can help you to manage symptoms on an ongoing basis and discuss the best approach for your individual circumstances.
- **Contact your state MS organisations** (details below) to access services including peer and/or online support and other resources.
- For information about MS and MS treatments visit www.msaustralia.org.au
- **Contact details for your state/territory MS organisations:**

MS Connect (Victoria, NSW, ACT and Tasmania)	1800 042 138	msconnect@ms.org.au	www.ms.org.au
MSWA (Western Australia)	1800 287 367	enquiries@mswa.org.au	www.mswa.org.au
MS Assist (South Australia and NT)	1800 812 311	msassist@ms.asn.au	www.ms.asn.au
MS Queensland	1800 287 367	mssociety@msqld.org.au	www.msqld.org.au

Other organisations

The following support services may be able to provide other advice:

- **Independent Living Centres 1300 885 886** www.ilcaustralia.org.au has products to assist with day-to-day living including anti-fatigue mats and footwear. Plus modified driving controls, eating and drinking aids, and assistive technology/equipment to conserve energy/reduce fatigue.
- **Carers Australia 1800 242 636** www.carersaustralia.com.au provides information and advice to carers, their friends and families about carer support and services.

Other resources

- The articles and posts on the MS Australia Wellbeing Wednesday platform, Facebook page and MS Uninterrupted blog, often include health and wellbeing topics, sometimes related to fatigue:
<https://www.msaustralia.org.au/living-ms> <https://www.facebook.com/MSAustralia/> <https://www.uninterrupted.org.au/>
- MS UK Trust booklet, Living with Fatigue: <https://support.mstrust.org.uk/shop?prodid=204>
- MS UK Trust blog, 'Describing fatigue to others': <https://www.mstrust.org.uk/news/views-and-comments/describing-fatigue-others>
- MS UK Trust, Living well with MS: <https://www.mstrust.org.uk/living-well-ms>

Sources: This fact sheet comprises material from previously published Australian state/territory MS Organisation leaflets plus Multiple Sclerosis (MS) UK Trust online resources (and associated references), and has been endorsed by a medical expert, an MS Nurse and a person living with MS.

Disclaimer: This information was prepared by MS Australia. It is intended to provide useful and accurate information of a general nature and is not a substitute for medical advice.