



ICU – Fatigue management

Fatigue is one of the most common symptoms experienced by patients who have been in the Intensive Care Unit. It is defined as the feeling of continued overwhelming exhaustion that affects your daily functioning and not always relieved by sleep.

While it can take time and may feel frustrating, please know that this a common part of the recovery process. Many people do experience notable improvements as time goes on and we're here to support you every step of the way.

This leaflet aims to help you understand fatigue, outline some strategies to help you manage your symptoms, aid your recovery and help people around you understand your experience.

What is fatigue?

Fatigue does not feel like normal tiredness. It can occur after minimal effort, have a prolonged effect and particularly if you're looking physically well, can be difficult for others to understand. Fatigue can have an effect on your body, your thinking, your feelings and how you spend time with others. Some common effects of fatigue are:

Physical effects

- Lack of energy and strength
- Feeling breathless after light activity
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty with co-ordination (clumsy)

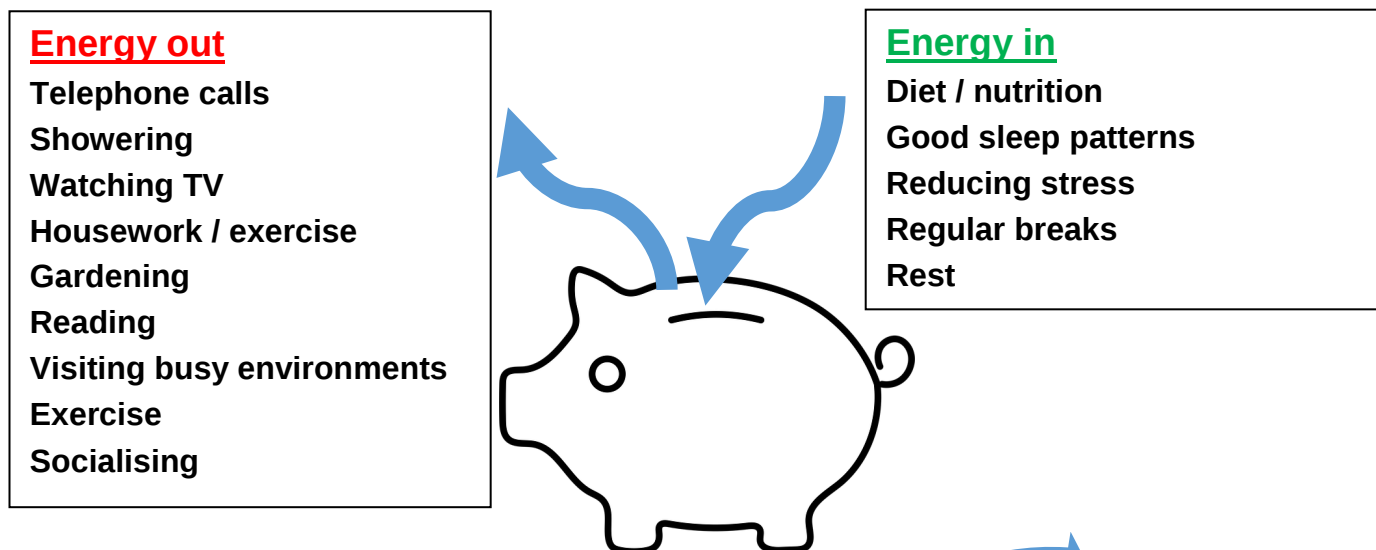
Cognitive, social and emotional effects

- Lack of concentration
- Difficulty reading, listening and processing
- Less interest in hobbies
- Reduced attention
- Low mood
- Easily overwhelmed

Visualising your fatigue

There are many ways to think of fatigue. Some people use the 'piggy bank' analogy where activities add or take away energy (money). You have a certain amount of money to spend each day and remember you need to keep your balance positive!

You may find that some of the 'energy out' activities that were relaxing previously, now result in fatigue. For example, watching TV or listening to music used to feel restful, but now the extra stimulation uses up more energy. This can feel disheartening, but with time you will make progress, and with use of strategies, you can find ways to do fulfilling things you enjoy.

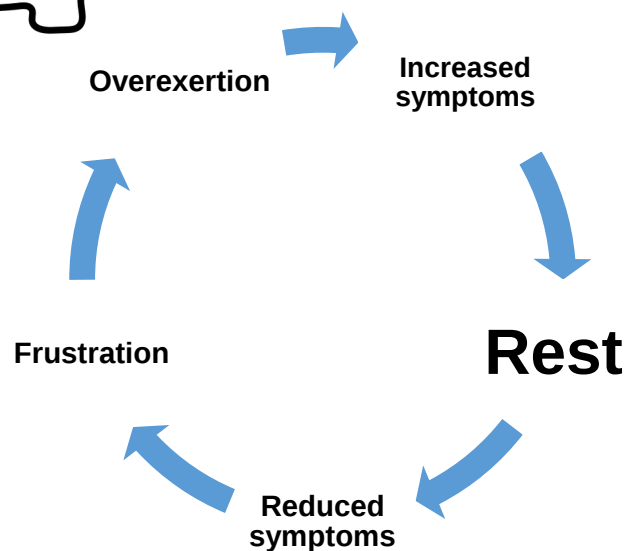


The cycle of over activity / underactivity can be seen in in this diagram and is common in those experiencing fatigue.

Before trialling techniques to help manage your fatigue, first choose a way of measuring your activity levels so you can monitor your progress.

A good way of doing this is keeping a diary. You can document your activities, e.g. 1km walk, completing a food shop or getting showered and dressed. Then document how you feel after performing each activity.

We suggest measuring this objectively, for example rating your fatigue out of 10. This makes it easier to look back on and see your progress.



Fatigue Diary

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
06:00–07:00						
07:00–08:00						
08:00–09:00						
09:00–10:00						
10:00–11:00						
11:00–12:00						
12:00–13:00						

Management techniques – Using the 5 P's

1. Prioritising

- Decide what your priorities are for the week ahead.
- Some things will be essential, others are for enjoyment, it is important you have a balance of both. As your fatigue improves over time, this may be easier to balance equally as you have more energy to complete additional things you enjoy.
- It is just as important to factor in rehabilitation activities as it is rest.

2. Pacing

- It is common to do a lot on a day you feel good, then very little on a challenging day. This can lead to big swings in activity.
- Pacing means spreading out your activities evenly to prevent you doing too much and continuing to factor in rest, even on a good day.
- This may also look like splitting up larger activities, such as housework, into smaller chunks, either with rest periods in-between or across multiple days.
- Knowing when to stop each activity is a matter of trial and error. Utilise your fatigue diary to identify patterns. Overtime, this will also help you gradually increase your activity.

3. Planning

- Plan what you are going to do and when, rather than simply what you feel like doing at the time.
- Make sure that the tasks and activities that are most demanding are not all done in one go but are well spread out across the week.
- You may find it helpful to alternate physical tasks and mental tasks.
- When planning, it is important to consider how important it is that the activity is completed and how much energy the activity will need.
- Again your fatigue diary should help with this.

4. Permission

- Ask for help if it is available to you; it is important that you focus on your recovery at this point. Asking for help is a sign of strength as you acknowledge your current situation.
- It is important to socialise but it is okay to set time boundaries prior to seeing your friends and family to prevent over stimulation.
- It is also important to be kind to yourself. If you come to do an activity and you're too tired, that's okay. It can be helpful at these points to look back in your diary and see how far you've come.

5. Position

- Lastly, look at the position you are in while completing a task. If you usually prep dinner while standing, is it possible to do it while sitting?
- Slide items instead of lifting.
- Keep items you frequently use close together.
- Small adaptations like this can be helpful in the earlier stages of recovery, or when trying to build in more enjoyable activities into your day.

Sleep

Sleep can have a big impact on fatigue, stress and mood, so it can be helpful to develop good sleep habits. Try to keep a regular sleep cycle to ensure an effective sleep-wake cycle and avoid exercise, caffeine and alcohol before bedtime. Other good sleep hygiene suggestions include avoiding screens (TV and mobile phones) at least an hour before going to bed and keep lights dim where safe to do so.

Nutrition

No one diet will suit everyone but when experiencing fatigue it is important to maintain a healthy, balanced diet with adequate fluid intake. The Association of UK Dietitians has a fact sheet for nutrition tips for those with chronic fatigue syndrome, which may be helpful for those recovering from critical illness.

Goal setting

Goal setting is about what's important to you and choosing what you want to work towards. You may then need to break that down into many smaller steps to help move you towards your main goal.

To come up with your goal/goals, first think about what you're currently doing and where you want to get to. Secondly, make a plan, thinking in small steps. Then, start taking those steps, remembering to be kind to yourself. Lastly, remember to keep track and adjust the goal accordingly.

Remember this is a journey and things do not always go to plan!

You will have good days and bad days but stay determined and these techniques will pay off!

Please do share this leaflet with your family, friends and employers to help explain your fatigue.

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

RBFT Intensive Care Unit

Abbi Tolputt, RACI Physiotherapist, September 2026

Next review due: September 2028