

Fatigue after stroke

What is post-stroke fatigue?

Fatigue has been described as an overwhelming sense of tiredness, a lack of energy and a feeling of exhaustion. It may not improve by resting and can affect activities that you want to do. Fatigue is a personal experience that is different for everyone. People may say they feel exhausted, lacking in energy, weak, unable to motivate themselves or sleepy. For others it may worsen difficulties associated with the stroke itself e.g. weakness, forgetfulness, distractibility, slurred speech. Unlike usual tiredness, fatigue doesn't always improve with rest and it isn't related to how busy or active you've been.

How common is post-stroke fatigue?

It is estimated that one in four stroke survivors experience extreme fatigue post stroke and one in three experiences moderate levels of fatigue. It remains one of the most common symptoms after stroke.

Why do I suffer with post-stroke fatigue?

It is thought that fatigue after stroke results from a combination of the stroke itself and psychological and emotional factors. In the first weeks and months after your stroke your brain and body are healing. The recovery process takes up a lot of energy so it is normal to feel very tired.

Emotional changes

A stroke can have a direct effect on your mood and emotional wellbeing. This may be as a consequence of the damage to the brain itself or because of the impact the stroke has had on your life.

Managing fatigue

In order to cope with fatigue you must first be able to recognise it. Some signs may include: yawning, losing concentration, eyes feeling heavy, head feeling "fuzzy", fidgeting/getting irritable and limbs feeling heavy.

For some people fatigue improves over time but for others fatigue is a symptom that you have to learn to manage.

Fatigue management is sometimes known as energy conservation and involves reflecting on your own fatigue and the way it affects you.

There are six identified principles of fatigue management:

1. Take frequent rests

If your fatigue is activity related it is important to balance activities with rests, and learn to allow for time to rest when planning a day's activities. It is important to take frequent short rests rather than one long one and rest before feeling tired.

2. Prioritising

This involves thinking about all the activities you have to do each day/week.

It may be useful to consider the following:

- Which jobs are most important or essential?
- Which activities do you enjoy?
- Which tasks could you delegate to someone else?
- Could you do any activities less often or eliminate them altogether?

3. Planning ahead

You may find it helpful to make a daily or weekly timetable of activities that need to be done and spread heavy and light tasks throughout the day. Break down large complicated tasks into smaller stages that can be spread throughout the day, e.g. peel potatoes in the morning to cook in the evening. Try to avoid those tasks which cannot be stopped at any time should you feel tired.

4. Organise tools, materials and work area

Consider placing tools and objects in continual use at a level between hip and shoulders and items used less often at a level from the hip to the floor.

5. Adopt a good posture

Activities should be carried out in a relaxed and efficient way, minimising stress on your body, which will save you energy. It is important to maintain an upright and symmetrical posture during all tasks and avoid excessive twisting and bending.

6. Lead a healthy lifestyle and exercise

Try to keep generally fit and eat a well balanced diet. Avoid heavy meals or only plan a light activity afterwards. Excess weight, alcohol and smoking can all have a negative effect on fatigue. Fast-releasing carbohydrates, in foods such as sweets, sugary cereals, white bread and sugary drinks, break down quickly and flood the blood with too much sugar. Surges in blood sugar levels may result in short term increase in energy, followed by decreased energy and concentration.

Slow-releasing carbohydrates, in foods like brown rice, wholegrain pasta, fruit and vegetables, are more "complex" and contain fibre that helps to slow down the release of sugar and so maintain energy levels. Drinking enough fluid, particularly water, keeps the brain and body hydrated.

Exercising improves our capacity to undertake physical activities. Try to choose something which you enjoy as you are more likely to continue with this.

Cognitive (thinking) strategies

Following a stroke you may need more mental effort to perform a task and you may experience difficulty sustaining this effort over time. When people experience “mental fatigue” people describe being unable to think clearly and have difficulty concentrating. You may find it helpful to apply strategies to assist and the following cognitive strategies may be useful:

- Use checklists to help you stay on track.
- Using alarms to prompt you to stay on tasks or take breaks.
- Carry out one task at a time to help your concentration.
- Use flow charts for planning and decision making.
- Try and complete more cognitively challenging tasks when you feel less fatigued.
- Use written notes or “Post it” notes as reminders.

More information

If you have any questions about this information, please speak to nurse or occupational therapist.

- <https://www.stroke.org.uk/effects-of-stroke/tiredness-and-fatigue>
- https://www.stroke.org.uk/sites/default/files/fatigue_after_stroke.pdf
- www.nhs.uk/conditions/Stroke/Pages/recovery.aspx

For more information about the Trust visit our website www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

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