Fatigue after stroke

Fatigue affects half of all stroke survivors, but the signs of fatigue are not always obvious to other people and so they may not understand how you are feeling. This factsheet explains what fatigue after stroke is, and suggests ways you can help yourself and seek support.

What is post-stroke fatigue?

Fatigue is different from normal tiredness, as it doesn’t seem to get better with rest. After a stroke, you may feel like you lack energy or strength, and feel constantly tired. Post-stroke fatigue is not necessarily related to recent activity, so it is not like typical tiredness. It can happen after a mild or more severe stroke.

One definition of fatigue is that in a one-month period, you have around two weeks feeling a lack of energy or increased need to rest every day, or nearly every day. This fatigue makes it difficult for you to take part in everyday activities.

If you think you may have fatigue, you might be tempted to dismiss how you are feeling. But it’s a good idea to speak to your GP or therapist, as you may be able to get treatment for the cause of your fatigue. You can also get support to manage fatigue as part of your recovery.

If you feel that fatigue is damaging your quality of life, or making it harder for you to take part in your rehabilitation, speak to your GP or specialist stroke nurse. You need help to understand the things that can trigger your fatigue, and how to manage it.

Who is affected by post-stroke fatigue?

Post-stroke fatigue can range from relatively mild to severe. The intensity of the tiredness does not seem to be related to what type of stroke you had, or how severe the stroke was. Even if you have made a full physical recovery, or your stroke was some time ago, fatigue can still be a problem. You may experience fatigue shortly after your stroke, or it can appear some time later.

Post-stroke fatigue may be more common among older people and women. There is a link with depression, although the two conditions can occur separately. It’s possible that having fatigue could lead to depression, and someone with depression can also have fatigue.

Many people describe fatigue as the most difficult and upsetting problem they have to cope with after a stroke. You may not feel able to engage fully in rehabilitation because you feel so tired. It can affect your ability to regain your independence in day-to-day life, and it can be difficult to return to work or to socialise and enjoy everyday activities. It can also affect your quality of life and relationships, as family and friends may not understand how genuinely exhausted you feel.
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Why do I feel so tired?

It is likely that a mixture of physical and emotional factors are contributing to you experiencing fatigue after stroke.

Physical causes

The physical impact of the stroke on your brain and body can be a direct cause of fatigue. In the early weeks and months after a stroke, your body is healing. The rehabilitation process can involve trying to do things in a completely new way, or learning and doing exercises. This takes up a lot of energy, so it is very common to feel tired.

You may have lost strength and fitness while in hospital, or as a result of the stroke.

If you have a disability after your stroke, this can mean you use energy in different ways. For example, walking and completing other daily activities may well take up much more energy than they did before your stroke, making you more likely to feel tired. However, even those who make a good physical recovery can still experience fatigue.

Emotional changes

Feeling depressed or anxious is common after a stroke, and can come with a sense of fatigue. If you feel your mood is low or you are feeling constantly irritable or tense then don’t ignore it. Your GP can prescribe medication or refer you on for practical support such as counselling. See our guide F10, Depression and other emotional changes for more information.

Other factors

Other factors that can affect how tired you feel include sleeping problems such as insomnia and sleep apnoea (interrupted breathing).

If you have trouble with swallowing or chewing, this could affect the amount of energy and nutrients you gain from your food.

Some health conditions such as anaemia (low levels of iron in the blood), diabetes or an underactive thyroid gland can also make you feel tired.

If you have pain after stroke such as muscle pain or headaches, this can also affect your energy levels.

Some common medications have fatigue as a side effect, such as beta blockers for high blood pressure, epilepsy drugs and antidepressants.
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Managing your fatigue

Although there isn’t a clearly defined treatment for post-stroke fatigue, there are some practical steps that you can try to help you manage your condition.

It is important to get individual advice from a GP or other health professional, to ensure that you have identified any underlying health problems. They will also help you to get the right support with your fatigue.

Find out the cause of your fatigue

Getting a proper diagnosis and finding out if there are any treatable causes for your fatigue is the first step. Your GP or stroke nurse can check if there are any medical conditions that could be making you feel tired.

Reviewing your current medication is also worthwhile. If your fatigue is at least partly caused by side effects of your medication, it usually improves with time or once you start a new medication. Never stop taking your medication suddenly, and ask your GP for advice if you have any problems with side effects.

Help others understand your fatigue

Your tiredness may not be obvious to other people so they may not understand how you feel. This may be frustrating for you. Show your family and friends this guide to help them understand what you are going through. They can offer you support with your recovery and dealing with tasks.

Tips for reducing and managing fatigue

• Give yourself plenty of time. It can take many months before post-stroke fatigue starts to lift. Accepting that it takes time to improve can help you to cope better.

• Keep a written or visual diary of how much you are doing each day. Over time this really helps to remind you of the progress you’ve made and will help you understand how much activity you can cope with, and what triggers your fatigue. Don’t push yourself to do too much if you’re having a ‘better day’. Although it is tempting, it may leave you exhausted for the next day or two.

• Celebrate your successes. Many people feel frustrated by what they can’t do and forget to feel good about what they have started to do again.

• Learn to pace yourself by taking proper breaks before or after doing things. Even gentle activities like talking with friends, a car journey and eating a meal can be tiring.

• Listen to your body. If you are exhausted during the day, then rest. This could either be sitting or lying down, or sleeping. However, if you are not sleeping at night, then try resting less during the day.

• Don’t make it hard for yourself by trying to do all the things you used to do, or at the same speed. It can be helpful to lower your expectations of what you can achieve for a while, so you can build up stamina and strength again slowly.
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- Find out how much you can do in a day and stick to it. For example, if you can achieve about four hours of activity a day (with rests in between) without being too tired then that is the right level for you. If you do too much, you will probably soon realise as you will need to rest more or have to spend a day in bed to recover.

- Build up stamina and strength slowly, or you may well feel you are going backwards if your fatigue worsens. Increase your activity gradually.

- Start to wind down during the evening and get into a bedtime routine.

- Try to do some exercise, as this may help to improve fatigue. Start gently, for example a very short walk or a few minutes on an exercise bike, and slowly build up without overdoing it.

- Eat healthily. Carbohydrates such as bread and pasta are good sources of energy, and try to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day. If you have trouble swallowing or eating after a stroke, you will need support from a dietician to help you eat the right types of food. Ask your GP to refer you for help.

- Seek support. Your GP or occupational therapist can help put you in touch with different types of support, for example stroke clubs, counselling, relaxation programmes, exercise groups or alternative therapies. Contact us for details of stroke clubs and other support in your area (see Where to get help and information).

Work and fatigue

If you are working, or thinking of going back to work, fatigue can have an impact on you. These practical tips may help, as well as seeking professional support and advice.

- Your workplace could be assessed by an occupational therapist. They will look at whether it's necessary to adapt any equipment you use or change work practices. If you are not currently seeing an occupational therapist, your GP can refer you, or your employer may appoint one.

- Give yourself plenty of time to recover from your stroke before going back to work. Putting pressure on yourself could make it harder.

- Talk to your employer about your stroke and how it has affected you. This can help them to make any reasonable adjustments needed to help you to do your job, such as having more frequent breaks.

- You could talk to your colleagues and explain your post-stroke fatigue. Because the tiredness is not visible it is unlikely they will know about it unless you tell them.

- Think about having a phased return. This could mean returning to work part-time to start with, sometimes only for a couple of hours each day or every other day. You can start with tasks that are manageable for you and your energy levels and build up slowly. Talk to your employer and agree a plan that works for both of you.
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For information about work, stroke and your legal rights, see our guide F45, *A complete guide to work and stroke.*

Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

**Talk to us**
Our Stroke Helpline is for anyone affected by a stroke, including family, friends and carers. The Helpline can give you information and support on any aspect of stroke.

Call us on **0303 3033 100**, from a textphone **18001 0303 3033 100** or email info@stroke.org.uk.

**Read our publications**
We publish detailed information about a wide range of stroke topics including reducing your risk of a stroke and rehabilitation. Read online at stroke.org.uk or call the Helpline to ask for printed copies.

**My Stroke Guide**
My Stroke Guide is the online stroke support tool from the Stroke Association. Log on to find easy-to-read information, advice and videos about stroke. And our chat forums can connect you to our online community, to hear how others manage their recovery. Log on at mystrokeguide.com.

Our dedicated Enquiry Line is on hand to support you with using My Stroke Guide. Call **0300 222 5707** or email mystrokeguide@stroke.org.uk.

Other sources of help and information

**British Dietetic Association**
**Website:** www.bda.uk.com
**Tel:** 0121 200 8080
Provides information on various aspects of diet and nutrition.

**Headway**
**Website:** www.headway.org.uk
A brain injury charity that publishes *Managing fatigue after brain injury*, a guide that explains what fatigue is and provides useful tips that can help you manage it.

**Health and Care Professions Council**
**Website:** www.hpc-uk.org
**Tel:** 0300 500 6184
Holds a register of health professionals including occupational therapists who meet national standards of training and practice.

**NHS Choices**
**Website:** www.nhs.uk/Livewell/tiredness-and-fatigue
Provides general information about tiredness and fatigue, including sleeping advice and tips on combating fatigue.

**Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT)**
**Website:** www.rcot.co.uk
**Tel:** 020 7357 6480
The RCOT is the professional body for occupational therapists in the UK. It has a number of specialist sections covering areas like neurological practice and independent (private) practice and offers a list of private therapists and advice on choosing an occupational therapist.
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Your notes
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About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That’s why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.

How did we do?
To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at feedback@stroke.org.uk.

Accessible formats
Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.

Always get individual advice
Please be aware that this information is not intended as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. We strive to ensure that the content we provide is accurate and up-to-date, but information can change over time. So far as is permitted by law, the Stroke Association does not accept any liability in relation to the use of the information in this publication, or any third-party information or websites included or referred to.