

Joy Ogden offers advice on what could be making you feel constantly exhausted – and what you can do about it

Tired, so tired

EVERYONE FEELS tired from time to time. If we can put it down to a late night, a hectic week or a night in the pub we allow ourselves a bit of a break and get over it quickly.

Sometimes, though, we feel constantly washed out and the tiredness won't go away, no matter how many early nights we have or how sensibly we behave. Research suggests that at any one time, one in five people feel unusually tired and one in 10 have persistent, prolonged fatigue. Women are more likely to be affected than men and such fatigue is least common in very young children and old people.

WHY ARE YOU TIRED?

Many things can cause chronic tiredness. It can be physical, such as a recent illness or – commonly, but perhaps surprisingly – lack of exercise. It can be emotional and triggered by stressful situations, such as moving house, bereavement, a relationship break up or problems with work or family.

Common causes of chronic tiredness:

Physical

- Pregnancy and breast-feeding
- Illnesses, especially anaemia
- Being too fat or too thin: If you are overweight your body has to work harder; if you are underweight your body has less muscle strength and tires more quickly
- Low blood sugar (hypoglycaemia) from an over-strict slimming diet or irregular meals
- Poor quality sleep
- Lack of exercise

Emotional

- Stress and anxiety – feeling you have no control over a situation

- Juggling work, children and study
- Depression

SELF-HELP

If you are constantly tired it is important to learn how to manage the problem. Improving the quality of your sleep, increasing your level of physical activity and watching your diet can often help.

Sleep

Our bodies need adequate sleep to rest, repair and regenerate. Lack of sleep leads to sallow skin and bags under the eyes, but also adversely affects memory and concentration.

Improve your sleep

- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day. Ensure your bedroom is quiet, dark and comfortable and neither too hot nor too cold
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol and heavy meals in the evening

- Take time to unwind before going to bed
- If you can't sleep, get up and read for a while then go back to bed when you feel sleepy

Take some exercise

Lack of physical activity makes you susceptible to tiredness, and being tired means you avoid exercise. To break the cycle, build exercise into your life – walk to the shops and up the stairs – any physical activity you enjoy and do regularly will improve your energy and stamina.

Watch your diet

Cut out sweet, stodgy, fatty foods and eat more fresh fruit and vegetables, together with wholegrain bread, pasta and brown rice to ensure your body has adequate supplies of vitamins and minerals. If you are overweight aim to lose weight gradually – a crash diet can worsen fatigue. Cut down on caffeine (coffee, tea, cola drinks and some herbal remedies) and alcohol.

Improve your lifestyle balance

Have realistic expectations about what you can achieve and consider making your life more balanced. Are you expecting too much of yourself? Try to plan your day and your week so you do a little each day rather than cramming everything into one day.

- If you still feel constantly tired after two weeks of better sleep, increased activity and a healthier diet, ask your GP for a check-up. Although unlikely, there could be a medical cause, such as anaemia, an under- or over-active thyroid, diabetes, high blood pressure, chronic fatigue syndrome or serious illness such as cancer.

