

# FATIGUE

Often described as tiredness, experiencing fatigue is greater than just feeling tired or sleepy. Fatigue is defined as the 'increasing difficulty in performing mental and physical activities as a consequence of inadequate, restorative sleep'. It is a feeling of constant tiredness or weakness and can be physical, mental or a combination of both. Despite its debilitating nature, fatigue is a symptom, not a condition. For someone feeling tired, this is often improved through a nap or a few nights of good sleep, with exercise also providing feelings of temporary refreshment. Whereas for someone experiencing fatigue, these techniques do not always contribute to improvement. Approximately 1.5 million Australians see their doctor regarding fatigue each year, able to affect anyone, with most adults experiencing fatigue at some point during their life.

## FATIGUE IN THE WORKPLACE

Shift work and shifts with extended hours refer to any non-standard work schedule. Traditional 8-hour work days operating between 7am and 6pm have changed considerably over time, with many roles and industries requiring employees to regularly work evening and night shifts, and / or extended hours.

Studies show that shift work and extended-hour shifts can have significant adverse effects on workers' health, workplace accident rates, absenteeism and personal lives.



## WHAT CAUSES FATIGUE?

There are many factors that can contribute to fatigue, including:  
Sleep issues – including sleep loss, inadequate amounts of sleep (< 7 - 8 hours), poor quality sleep or long periods of being awake (> 17 hours).

Medical causes – unrelenting exhaustion may be a sign of an underlying illness, such as: a thyroid disorder, heart disease or diabetes.

Lifestyle-related causes – alcohol, drugs, an inadequate diet or lack of regular exercise can lead to feelings of fatigue.

Emotional concerns – fatigue is a common symptom of mental health problems, such as depression or experiencing grief, and may be accompanied by other signs and symptoms, including irritability or lack of motivation.

Workplace-related causes – workplace stress or sustained mental or physical effort can lead to feelings of fatigue.

Fatigue can also be caused by a number of these factors working in combination.

## SIGNS & SYMPTOMS OF FATIGUE

- Fatigue can cause a vast range of other physical, mental and emotional symptoms, including:
- Chronic tiredness, sleepiness and difficulty keeping eyes open
- Blurred vision
- Headaches or dizziness
- Poor concentration, impaired judgement and reduced attention span
- Irritability and appetite loss
- Low motivation
- Impaired immune system



# HEALTH EFFECTS OF SHIFT WORK

Partial sleep deprivation is the main problem that affects the health and onset of fatigue amongst shift workers.

Ultimately, night work disrupts the circadian rhythms (or internal 'body clock') of the human body. These rhythms operate in a synchronized, 24-hour period, important in the regulation and continuity of numerous physiological functions including: body temperature, hormone secretion, heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, digestion and mental alertness. Researchers have identified that shift and extended-hour workers can experience numerous, negative health effects when this internal clock is disturbed, including:

- Sleep disorders and increased fatigue
- Heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes
- Mental health issues and digestion disorders
- Medication side effects
- Lower fertility

**"Approximately 1.5 million Australians visit their GPs annually regarding fatigue."**

*-Vic Health*

## TIPS TO ELEVATE ENERGY & FIGHT FATIGUE

**Drink plenty of water.** Hydration aids the regulation of bodily functions and processes. Dehydration causes the body to function less efficiently. Aim for 6-8 glasses a day.

**Be careful with caffeine.** Despite providing feelings of a boost in energy and mental alertness after consumption, it is important to remember that coffee actually works to mask your level of fatigue; by suppressing the body's natural chemicals that are released to slow the body's systems when it is feeling fatigued. Heavy caffeine users (more than six drinks per day) are prone to anxiety, irritability and reduced performance. Avoid energy drinks, as they can leave you feeling worse once the sugar and caffeine wears off.

**Eat breakfast.** Food boosts your metabolism and supplies the body energy to use. The brain in particular relies on glucose for fuel, so choosing carbohydrate-rich breakfast foods such as oats with fresh fruit or wholegrain bread are great options to start your day!

**Avoid skipping meals.** Going without food for too long causes blood sugar levels to drop. Aim to eat regularly through the day to maintain your energy levels.

**Eat a healthy diet.** Promote fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, low fat dairy products and lean meats through your diet. Remain conscious around limiting processed foods high in sugar, fat and salt.

# PROTECT YOUR SKIN

**Aim for portion control.** Overconsuming food in large meals can contribute to significant fluctuations in blood sugar levels through the day, leading to large peaks and depletions of energy. Try eating six smaller meals to spread out your kilojoule intake more evenly across the day. This will result in more constant blood sugar and insulin levels, and you may also see this contribute to more consistent loss of excess body fat.

**Consume food rich in iron.** Women, in particular, are prone to iron-deficiency (anemia). Regularly consuming iron-rich foods through your diet, such as lean red meat, can help to sustain iron levels and energy as a result.

**Achieve enough sleep.** Adults require between 7 - 9 hours of sleep per night. Remain conscious of your sleep habits such as: bedroom environment, nighttime routine and use of technology to best ensure you get a good, replenishing night's sleep.

**Learn how to relax.** A common cause of insomnia is fretting about problems while lying in bed trying to get to sleep. Experiment with different relaxation techniques to try and calm your mind and body; a restful sleep will help with tomorrow's energy levels.

**Avoid sleeping pills.** Sleeping pills are not a long term solution regarding fatigue because they do not address the causes of insomnia. Many people find that they actually feel worse the following day after taking sleeping pills, because despite helping them fall asleep, they do not always promote a restful sleep.

**Have a healthy lunch.** The aim is to consume something that will sustain you through the afternoon.

Eating a combination of protein and carbohydrates is a fantastic lunch, for example a tuna sandwich.

Carbohydrates provide glucose for energy, and the amino acid tyrosine (found in proteins such as soy products, chicken, fish and almonds, as well as avocados and bananas) allows the brain to synthesize the neurotransmitters dopamine and norepinephrine, which help keep your mind attentive and alert.

**Get moving!** A brisk walk at lunchtime or even 5 minutes of stretching at your desk improves blood flow and boosts energy.

**Avoid cigarettes.** Cigarette smoke contains many harmful substances and there are numerous reasons why smokers typically have lower energy levels than non-smokers. For example, for the body to make energy it needs to combine glucose with oxygen, however, the carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke reduces the amount of oxygen available in the blood.



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103 Henley Beach Rd Mile End  
SA 5031

**Increase physical activity.** While a sedentary lifestyle is known to contribute to fatigue, physical activity boosts energy levels. A good bout of exercise also helps to improve sleep quality through the night.

**Limit the time that you spend sitting down.** Research suggests those who live with less sedentariness through their lifestyles subsequently experience lower levels of fatigue. In this regard, aim to limit the periods of time seated at work and at home.

**Seek treatment for substance abuse.** Excessive alcohol consumption and recreational drug use contributes to fatigue, and can be hazardous in regards to short and long-term health outcomes.

**Workplace issues.** Demanding jobs, workplace conflicts and burnout are common causes of fatigue. Try to take steps to address problems or tensions within your work environments. A good place to start is to speak with your human resources officer.

**Coping with the mid-afternoon energy slump!** Most people experience feelings of drowsiness after lunch. This common mid-afternoon drop in energy levels is linked to the brain's circadian rhythm and is 'hard wired' into the human body. Prevention in this regard is likely impossible, however there are ways to reduce the severity of the slump, including: not skipping breakfast, snacking on nutritious food through the day, avoid high-sugar foods to prevent quick, unstained levels of energy, sleep well, actively move through your day, and maintain fluids.

## ARE YOU AWAKE?

Being awake for **17 hours** is the equivalent of having a blood alcohol level of **0.05**.

Being awake for **20 hours** is the equivalent of having a blood alcohol level of **0.1**.



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