

This four-page fact sheet is about fatigue after stroke. It explains:

- types of fatigue after stroke
- why you might experience fatigue after stroke
- how to conserve your energy and
- tips for managing your fatigue and returning to work.



## FATIGUE AFTER STROKE

Everyone feels tired sometimes. This is a normal part of life and it happens for all sorts of reasons such as not sleeping well or being very busy all day. Usually people feel much better after resting or sleeping. Fatigue after stroke is different; you may feel constantly weary, tired and lacking energy or strength. These feelings and symptoms are present even after a rest or sleep.

The cause of fatigue after stroke is not clear even though it affects about 50% of people who have experienced a stroke. It may be a combination of damage to the brain and the stress and effort associated with adjusting to a new life situation. After stroke, almost all activities including walking and talking require extra energy and attention. Brain function may be less 'efficient' than before.

## TYPES OF FATIGUE AFTER STROKE

- **Physical fatigue**

"I'm tired and I need to rest. I feel as if I am dragging myself around today."

Your body needs to work harder to do things that were easy and 'automatic' beforehand. Physical fatigue gets worse in the evening and is better after a good night's sleep. This fatigue can come from muscle weakness and may reduce as you get stronger.

- **Psychological fatigue**

"I just can't get motivated to do anything. Being depressed wears me out; I just don't feel like doing anything."

This type of fatigue is linked with depression, anxiety and emotional changes after stroke and gets worse with stress. Sleep may not help at all. The fatigue is often at its worst when you wake up in the morning.

- **Mental fatigue**

"After a while, I just can't concentrate anymore. It's hard to stay focused. My mind goes blank."

After stroke, many common daily activities take much more concentration. Working hard to think and stay focused can make you mentally tired.

## WHY YOU MIGHT HAVE FATIGUE AFTER STROKE

It is important to find out why you feel so tired as fatigue can be 'hidden' amongst the effects of stroke and some medical problems. Your fatigue may be directly linked with having had a stroke. However, one or more of the reasons listed here may also contribute to you feeling constantly tired.



- **Meals and snacks**

You may not be eating enough to provide your body with sufficient energy to get through the day. This can be caused by difficulty eating, drinking and swallowing. Sometimes people forget to eat at regular times throughout the day and they run out of energy as the day progresses.



- **Medical conditions**

Problems which may be complicating your fatigue include anaemia (iron deficiency), diabetes, insomnia, sleep-related breathing disorders and poor thyroid gland function. You may need investigations including blood tests and, if necessary, specific treatment.



- **Medications**

A review of your medication is worthwhile to find out if any of your medicines are making you tired. Sometimes medicines, such as muscle relaxants and pain relief, can cause or increase fatigue. Your GP or specialist will consider your situation and discuss medicine options with you. **Never stop taking your medication suddenly because you think it is making you tired.**



- **Depression**

This can cause or increase fatigue too so tell your doctor if you think you are depressed. There are treatment and self-help options – it's good to get this started as soon as possible.

A good starting point is to discuss how you are feeling with your GP or specialist. They can work out if you need any special treatment or medication.

## CONSERVING YOUR ENERGY

### PLANNING    PRIORITISING    PACING

Your fatigue may stop you doing many things, so it's worth taking time to think about what you really want to do and what really needs to be done. These three 'Ps' are a useful guide for conserving energy, managing each day at your pace and gradually reclaiming your life.

#### 1. Planning

Make a list of the things you want to achieve during the day or over the week. Plan how and when you're going to do certain activities, and spread them out wherever possible. You can space hard jobs and activities throughout the day or over a week. Be sure to include fun, social activities.

## 2. Prioritising

After you've made your list put it in order of importance and then decide which things you can remove, delay or delegate. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does this need to be done today?
- Does it need to be done at all?
- Do I have to do it, or can someone else?
- Can I get someone to help me with parts of the task?

Then you can revise your list with the essential things at the top.

## 3. Pacing

Break down your essential activities into achievable parts and spread the activity throughout the day or week. Learn to pace yourself by taking short, regular rest breaks. Gradually increase the time of each activity.

Listen to your body and pay attention to what triggers your fatigue. Learn to identify early signs of your fatigue such as becoming irritated or unable to concentrate. Stop, take a break and then continue.

## TIPS



### Ask for help

You don't have to manage on your own. Occupational therapists and physiotherapists provide support about making the most of your energy and building your stamina and strength. Dietitians advise about getting enough to eat each day. Speech and language therapists help with communication, chewing and swallowing problems.



### Keep a diary

It is useful to keep a written, picture or electronic diary of how much you are doing each day. This will remind you of your progress. Remember to celebrate your success and achievements.



### Daily, regular exercise reduces fatigue

Over time, being more active helps lessen physical and mental fatigue and builds stamina. Exercise may also help depression and improve sleep. It's important to do some physical activity each day. Start with a short walk or a few minutes exercising, gradually increase your time. Remember to note your progress.



### Eat regularly

A well-balanced diet will give you enough energy to keep going. You may need to eat regular snacks throughout the day as a pick-me-up to provide energy especially if you are having difficulty chewing and swallowing.



### Drink plenty of water

This is a good way to stay hydrated and maintain your energy.



### **If you choose to drink alcohol, be cautious**

Alcohol will generally make your fatigue worse and often give you a restless sleep.



### **Build regular patterns into your day**

One good pattern is to have an active day with some time spent outside. Relax and wind down in the evening and try going to bed at the same time each night.



### **Understand more about other stroke survivors' experiences**

If you are using the internet, other stroke survivors' experiences with fatigue may help you and your family. Go to YouTube and type in 'fatigue after stroke'. Many stories, which may be helpful, will pop up.

## **TIPS ABOUT RETURNING TO WORK**



Even though you may be eager to get back to work, it's important to be aware of any lasting effects of your stroke. About half the people affected by stroke experience problems with fatigue and you may get tired far more quickly than you used to.

Give yourself plenty of time to recover from your stroke before going back to work. Putting pressure on yourself to go back before you are ready will only make it harder.

Many people return to work part time and gradually build up to their full hours. Your Community Stroke Advisor, case manager, occupational therapist and employer will support you in preparing a work plan that is best suited to your situation.



**Travel to and from work**, combined with the demands of your job, may cause fatigue. This can happen even if you have been managing well before going back to work.



**It is important to talk to your employer and colleagues** about post-stroke fatigue so they understand more about how you are feeling and what you are able to do.

If you need further advice and support, please contact the **Stroke Foundation** on **0800 78 76 53**.