

TIREDNESS AND FATIGUE



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

This Essential Guide is about tiredness and fatigue.

It explains:

- why you might feel tired or have fatigue if you have a chest, heart or stroke condition
- how tiredness and fatigue can affect you
- how to cope with tiredness and fatigue and save energy.

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is the name given to extreme, ongoing tiredness which is not stopped by rest or sleep.

Fatigue is not “just” tiredness. It affects your whole body, and can cause a range of problems like dizziness, insomnia, digestive problems, heart irregularities, or mood disturbances.

Fatigue affects everybody differently. For some people, their fatigue is mild, and may have little or no impact on their daily life. For others, fatigue can make it impossible to complete daily tasks or drastically reduce their day-to-day function.



Where this guide talks about “tiredness”, the information also applies to fatigue.

Tiredness, fatigue, and long-term health conditions

Everyone feels tired sometimes. Usually, rest or sleep can make you feel better.

However, living with a **long-term health condition** puts more stress on your body and mind, and can make you feel tired more of the time. You may have little energy or motivation to do everyday tasks.

Many people living with a chest or heart condition, or who have had a stroke, experience tiredness and fatigue. This can have a big impact on your daily life, work, and relationships.

There are many things you can do to minimise the impact of tiredness and fatigue, to feel better, and to save your energy.

Why do I feel so tired?



If you have a **long-term chest condition** or **heart failure**, you may have less oxygen in your blood or less oxygen reaching your muscles and organs. This can make you feel tired.



A **stroke** or **transient ischaemic attack (TIA)** can cause fatigue due to the physical and emotional adjustments you may have to make. This is called **post-stroke fatigue**. For some people, post-stroke fatigue may improve over time.



Any long-term condition can put you under **emotional and mental stress**. In the long term, this can contribute to fatigue and tiredness.

Other reasons you might feel tired

Broadly speaking, fatigue or tiredness occur when your body needs more energy than it can produce. There are many reasons this can happen - either because less energy is being produced, or because more is being used.

Physical factors

After a stroke or heart attack, your body and brain need extra energy to recover and heal.

Difficulty sleeping or bad sleep can reduce the energy your body restores overnight.

Your condition may change how you do things, or force you to adjust your routine. This can be physically and mentally tiring.

Some nutrient deficiencies, like anaemia (iron deficiency) can reduce energy production

Emotional factors

It is normal for people with a long-term health condition to feel stress, anger, frustration, worry, or depression. These feelings can affect your energy levels.

Your medication

Tiredness can be a side-effect of some medications.

If you think your medications are making you feel tired, discuss this with your doctor. They may be able to change your medication to something that works better for you.



Never stop taking medication without your doctor's advice. Speak to your doctor before making any changes.

Discuss your tiredness with your doctor to find out whether anything else might be making you tired. You may be able to get treatment for the underlying problem.

How tiredness can affect you

Tiredness affects everyone differently.

Some ways tiredness can affect you:

Relationships

Feeling less motivated to spend time with others or do things you usually enjoy.

Being short-tempered, easily frustrated, or unable to offer support to people around you.





Physical health

Feeling weak, “wobbly”, low in energy, breathless, or dizzy.

If you have severe fatigue, you may have tingling or pain in your joints.



Thoughts and feelings

Having difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions, or staying motivated.



Daily life

Having difficulty doing everyday tasks like washing, dressing, or cooking.

“Brain fog”

“Brain fog” is not a single symptom, but is a general term for the effects which fatigue can have on thinking, concentration, and memory. It’s called brain fog because people often describe it as feeling like their mind is “clouded” or “fogged up”. Brain fog can be present all the time, or it can come and go.

The feeling can vary a lot, but may include:

- Trouble concentrating
- Difficulty finding words or communicating
- Forgetfulness
- Slowed reactions and slower thinking
- Head “stuffed-up” or “full of cotton wool”
- Blurred or unfocused vision
- Becoming overwhelmed or struggling to process what you see and hear

Brain fog is often the most obvious symptom of fatigue. The best way to manage it is to avoid fatigue triggers, but there are also things you can do to prepare for periods of brain fog

Keep notes of important information, so you can remember it later.

Forgive yourself. Remember it's okay to make mistakes or to take longer on something than you might normally.

If possible, take breaks or do easy work during times when your brain fog is bad. It may help to keep a list of "easy" tasks you can do.

Talk to the people around you and explain that sometimes you may find it hard to think or to process information.

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland produces a wallet card to explain brain fog quickly to those around you. Find it at **chss.org.uk**



Fatigue and relationships

Fatigue can put a strain on your relationships, especially with people you live with or work with. Not only can your fatigue make it difficult to deal with other people's frustrating behaviours, it can also make it difficult to contribute to a relationship in the same way that you may have done in the past.

It is important that you let people know that you are struggling with tiredness and fatigue. If people around you are frustrated that you aren't doing things that you used to - like chores, providing emotional support, or having sex - let them know that it isn't personal and that you have limited energy resources.

Try to have discussions with loved ones about what you can bring to your relationship, and what you need from each other.

Spoon theory

“Spoon theory” is a way to explain fatigue, first developed in the early 2000s by a blogger with lupus, which has been widely adopted in disabled communities.

Imagine that at the beginning of each day, you are given a fixed number of spoons - representing how much energy you have.

For each task you carry out through the day, you have to give away a set number of spoons. When you have no spoons left, you will be unable to do any more activities.

When you are fatigued, you have fewer spoons at the beginning of the day. Tasks may also cost you more spoons than they would cost the average person.

This can be a helpful way to explain to people without fatigue why you can do some things and not others. Some people also like to describe their energy as a battery which runs down over time.

What can I do to feel less tired?

There are lots of things that may help you to manage your energy levels and feel less tired.

Don't be discouraged if one of these isn't working for you - like everything else about fatigue and tiredness, it's very personal and individual, and may work differently for different people.





Keep active

If you feel very tired, it can be hard to exercise. However, in some cases, especially following a stroke or heart attack, regular physical activity can help to **build your energy levels** and make you **less tired**. This is because it:

- Increases blood flow around the body
- Builds strength and muscle tone
- Helps oxygen get to your muscles

If you find that activity makes you very tired, try breaking it up into smaller amounts. For example, instead of a 15-minute walk, try to take three 5-minute walks throughout the course of the day.

If you still find it hard to exercise, or if it causes you pain or other symptoms, it is okay to reduce your activity levels. Speak to your health professional about how to keep active in a way that is safe and will not exacerbate your symptoms.

Get better sleep



Sleeping well can help you to feel less tired. It can also help with your recovery and healing, your mood, and your memory.

If you have severe fatigue, sleep may not always make you feel better, but it is still a good idea to get into a healthy sleep routine.

Tips for getting a good sleep:

Relax before bed by having a bath, reading a book, or listening to the radio.

Avoid TVs, phones, and computers for at least one hour before bed.

Go to bed at the same time every night. Try to get up around the same time every day, where possible.

Make sure your bedroom is quiet, dark, and a comfortable temperature.

Avoid alcohol and caffeine near bedtime.

Maintain a healthy weight



If you are overweight or severely underweight, your body may have to work harder to function normally. This can make you feel more tired.

Ensuring you are at a healthy weight can increase your energy levels and make you feel less tired. It can also reduce your risk of other health problems that can lead to tiredness.

Eating a healthy, balanced diet, combined with regular physical activity, is the best and healthiest way to reach a healthy weight.

Avoid “crash” dieting, and always consult with a health professional before undertaking serious weight loss procedures. Remember that losing too much weight too fast can also contribute to fatigue.



Eat well and avoid caffeine



Eating a healthy, balanced diet can help you to keep your energy up and feel less tired.

A healthy, balanced diet is:

- High in fruit, vegetables, fibre, and protein
- Low in saturated fat, salt, and sugar

Find out more in the CHSS booklet on **Healthy Eating**.

Avoid high-sugar snacks and meals, as these can offer you a brief boost in energy but at the cost of crashing later. Instead, focus on eating foods that release energy slowly - starchy foods, proteins, and vegetables.

Avoid skipping meals, and build a regular daily meal routine. This helps your body to adjust its energy use throughout the day.

Try to avoid caffeine (found in tea, coffee, energy drinks, energy pills, and some fizzy drinks like cola), as this affects your sleep.

Find what your triggers are



“Triggers” are things which make you feel more tired or make your fatigue symptoms worse. Knowing what these are can help you to manage your tiredness.

It can help to keep an activity diary.

Keep a note of things that make you feel more tired or less tired. For example:

- Activities you did
- What you ate and drank
- Time of day, and day of the week
- Your mood and anything stressing you

Use the diary to look for patterns. This can help you to understand what changes you might need to make to your routine.

Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland also offers a worksheet to track your energy use hour by hour. Find it at **www.chss.org.uk**

Plan ahead and pace yourself



Be realistic about what you can fit into a day.

Plan your activities for times when you tend to feel less tired - for example, you might feel better in the morning than the afternoon.

Spread out tiring tasks across your day and week, and take plenty of breaks.

Give yourself plenty of time to do activities.

Make sure you keep things in perspective - don't stress about not getting to tasks that aren't important.

Build in activities you enjoy where possible.

Don't overdo it! You may be tempted to pack all your activity into days when you feel better, but this will only exhaust you and pull you into a "boom and bust" cycle.

Don't be too hard on yourself. Accept that some days will be better than others.

Find time to relax



Reducing stress and feeling relaxed can make you feel less tired.

Try to make time for things you enjoy and find restorative, like going for a walk, listening to music, or meeting friends.

Build structured rest times into your day, and make sure you actually do rest in those times.

Ask for help if you need it



Asking for help can be hard, but it can also be the most important way to help yourself feel better. Having support from others reduces stress and takes off some of the workload you may struggle with.

It is OK to tell friends, family, and co-workers when you are feeling tired, and what they can do to help.

Energy saving tips



Around the house

Sit down instead of standing where possible - for example, while getting dressed, folding clothes, or preparing food.

Keep things you may need close by.

Wear clothes that are easy to put on and take off.

Spread household chores out over the week, doing a little each day. Get help from family, friends, or a hired cleaner if you can.

Cook simple, easy meals to reduce the time you spend in the kitchen. If you make large quantities of food, you can freeze meals for later to save time when you feel worse.

Leave dishes to soak so they are easier to wash. Drip-dry them, rather than drying by hand.

Shopping

Go shopping at quiet times - avoid early evenings and weekends, when shops are busier.

Make a shopping list before you go.

Ask someone to go with you for extra help if you need it.

Use a trolley rather than a shopping basket.

Shop online if you can, and have it delivered at a time that suits you.

At work

Discuss possible changes with your employer, such as rest breaks or reduced hours.

If you drive, park as close to work as you can.

Work from home if you are able.

Try to avoid taking on overtime or TOIL.

Getting help

There are lots of different kinds of support that you can access to help you to manage your tiredness.



Help from family and friends

It is important to ask for help when you need it. This could be help with practical tasks, or just emotional support and understanding.

Explaining how your tiredness affects you can help your family and friends to understand and help.

Tell them what will help you the most - for example, keeping visits short or offering support with chores.

Keep a list of what you might need help with in the future.

Accept help when it is offered.

Help and support can also come from:

- Exercise groups
- Local peer support groups
- Relaxation and mindfulness programmes
- One-to-one counselling
- Online groups for people with fatigue


Local groups may also be able to arrange help for you in your home, with things like cooking and cleaning. You may be able to access benefits to pay for this – look at the CHSS booklet **Financial Support** for more information.


Equipment and aids to make day-to-day tasks easier are also available, through support networks or privately.


Speak to your doctor or nurse, or call the **Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland AdviceLine** on **0808 801 0899** for more information on local support available to you.





Myths and Facts


 **MYTH:** Fatigue and tiredness are the same thing.


 **FACT:** Everyone gets tired, but we usually get better after a rest or sleep. Fatigue has more symptoms, and may not be helped by sleep.


 **MYTH:** People will be able to see when I'm tired and know when I need help.


 **FACT:** Tiredness and fatigue are often invisible. It helps to be open about your symptoms and how they can help.


 **MYTH:** If medication makes me tired, I should just stop taking it.


 **FACT:** You should never change your medication without your doctor's agreement and supervision.


 **MYTH:** Tiredness is “all in my head”, so I can power through and ignore it.

 **FACT:** Tiredness and fatigue are physical conditions, and ignoring them can make symptoms much worse. Listen to your body and rest when you're tired.

 **MYTH:** I should feel guilty for not getting things done. I'm just being lazy.

 **FACT:** Suffering from fatigue does not mean you are “lazy” or “weak” - it's an illness, not a failure!

 **MYTH:** When I feel tired, a strong coffee or energy bar will help me feel better.

 **FACT:** The caffeine and sugar in these foods and drinks give you a quick energy boost, but it passes quickly and may make you feel even more tired later.

Our publications are available for free to anyone in Scotland who needs them. Go to www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub for all our resources, including other Essential Guides in this series.

For free, confidential advice and support from our **Advice Line nurses**, call: 0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm), text: NURSE to 66777 or email: adviceline@chss.org.uk.

Across Scotland, over one million people – that's one in five of us – are living with the effects of a chest, heart or stroke condition. We are here to help everyone who needs us. But we need your support to do this. Go to www.chss.org.uk/supportus to find out how you can help more people in Scotland.

If you would like this resource in an alternative format, please contact our Advice Line nurses.

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