

# COPING WITH TIREDNESS

**Many people with chest, heart and stroke conditions experience tiredness or fatigue. This factsheet explains some of the reasons why you might feel so tired. It also offers advice to help you cope with tiredness and suggests ways to conserve energy.**

Everyone feels tired sometimes, but usually you will feel better after resting. However, many people living with a long-term health condition feel extreme tiredness (or fatigue) for much of the time, leaving them with little energy or motivation for everyday tasks such as getting dressed or cooking a meal. This can have a huge impact on family life, daily life, work and relationships.

FACTSHEET



For some people with a long-term chest illness, damage to the lungs means that less oxygen gets into the blood. This can leave you feeling tired and out of breath with even minimal activity.



If your heart is not pumping properly, the blood supply to your muscles may be reduced. This can lead to tiredness or fatigue, especially after physical exertion.



Post-stroke fatigue is one of the most common effects of stroke. It affects most people who have had a stroke, regardless of the severity of the stroke. Disturbed sleep can also make you feel more tired.

## Why do I feel so tired?

There are a number of reasons you may feel more tired than normal if you have a long-term health condition.

### Physical reasons

- Your body is recovering from a sudden event like a stroke or a heart attack and your brain and body are using extra energy to heal.
- You may be having difficulty sleeping, for example because of pain, and this can make you more tired during the day.
- Physical changes may mean that you are learning to do things in a different way and this can be tiring both mentally and physically.
- Some people with chest (lung) and heart conditions may not be getting enough oxygen into their bodies, or the blood supply to their muscles can be affected. This can result in tiredness.

### Emotional reasons

- You may, understandably, be feeling stressed, frustrated, angry or depressed. These emotions can make you feel extremely tired and cause sleep disturbances.

### Your medication

- Tiredness can be a side effect of some medicines. Discuss this with your doctor if you think your medicines are making you feel tired.

## What can I do to feel less tired?

There are many things you can do that can help restore your energy levels if you are feeling tired. These include:

### Keep active

You may feel too tired to exercise but research has shown that regular exercise such as walking or swimming will help you feel less tired in the long run and you will have more energy as a result. Even a single 15-minute walk can give you an energy boost, and the benefits increase the more exercise you do. Regular exercise is also an excellent way to stay healthy.



See the CHSS factsheet *Just Move* for more information on keeping active.

### Get good-quality sleep

Try to make sure you get a good night's sleep. A routine of going to bed and getting up in the morning at the same time can help you establish a good sleep pattern. Other things such as a nice warm bath or a hot milky drink before bed can also help. Avoid alcohol before bed as you'll get a better night's rest and have more energy.

### Cut out caffeine

If you can, cut out caffeine. Try to stay off caffeine totally for a month and see if you feel less tired as a result. Don't forget it's not just tea or coffee that contain caffeine but also some soft drinks and energy-boosting pills too. If you find that not drinking caffeine gives you headaches, just try to cut down slowly rather than cutting it out too quickly.

### Eat regular meals and healthy snacks, and drink plenty of fluids

A good way to keep up your energy is to eat a healthy, well-balanced diet. A balanced diet is choosing a variety of foods daily in the right amounts including:

- Fruit and vegetables: aim for at least 5 portions a day.
- Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods: should make up about a third of your daily food intake.
- Dairy and alternatives: try to include 2-3 portions of milk and dairy products (or alternatives) each day. Choose low fat, low sugar options.
- Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins: try to eat 2-3 portions per day, including 2 portions of fish per week.

- Keep well hydrated: try to drink at least 6-8 glasses of non-alcoholic fluid a day (unless you are on a fluid-restricted diet).

Try to eat at regular times as this will help sustain energy levels. Avoid having large meals or skipping meals as this can make tiredness worse.



See the CHSS factsheet *Healthy Eating* for more information on eating a healthy, balanced diet.

### **Lose weight**

If you are overweight, losing weight can help you feel more energetic. Carrying extra weight can be exhausting and means that your body has to work harder just to do everyday things.



See the CHSS factsheet *Losing Weight* for more information on how to improve your health by losing weight.

### **Pace yourself**

It's a good idea to keep a diary of your energy levels on a normal day and after certain activities so you can keep track of any changes. Keeping a note of your energy levels will also help you to identify the days and times when you have more energy.

Learn to pace yourself by taking breaks before and after activity. Build up stamina and strength slowly and increase your activity gradually. If you feel like a 'power nap' make sure you take it, even if it's only 20 minutes.

Give yourself plenty of time. Accepting that it takes time to improve can help you cope with your tiredness. Don't push yourself to do too much if you are having a good day as this may then leave you exhausted for the next day or so.

### **Plan ahead**

Plan your day so that you do a little every day. Be as realistic as possible about what you can and can't do. Some people may feel less tired in the mornings while others cope better in the afternoon. Try to plan tasks at the time of day that best suits you. Remember to plan periods of rest.

**Relax**

Try to make sure you relax regularly. This could be by going for a walk, listening to music, watching television, reading or spending time with friends. Anything that helps you relax and reduces stress will help you feel less tired.

**What can I do to conserve energy?**

There are things you can do to help you manage your everyday life that will help you to save your energy and feel less tired. Here are a few ideas:

- Try to do a little each day rather than a lot in one go.
- Try to avoid unnecessary walking or carrying around the home by having things you know you are going to need nearby.
- Sit down for as many activities as possible. For example, while you are getting washed, dressed or preparing food.
- Spread housekeeping tasks over the week and ask for help if you need it either from family or friends or, if you can afford it, hire a cleaner.
- Wear clothes that are easy to put on and take off.
- Try cooking simpler meals to reduce the amount of time you spend in the kitchen. Prepare extra quantities or meals when you're feeling less tired and freeze them for when you need them.
- Let dishes soak rather than scrubbing them and leave them to drip dry. Use a dishwasher if you have one.
- Do your shopping online if you can and have it delivered at a time that suits you.
- If you do have to go shopping, try to go at less busy times, make a shopping list and use a shopping trolley for support. It may also help you to have someone with you for extra help if possible.

## Who can help me?

Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it. Friends or family may be able to help you or social services can arrange domestic help if required. If you are feeling particularly tired, explain this to friends and family so they understand that sometimes short phone calls or brief visits are better.

The next time someone says "if there's anything I can do to help...." take them up on the offer. Keep a list of things that others can help you with.

Other sources of support for you could include local support groups, counselling, relaxation programmes, exercise groups. For more information on local support near you, speak to your GP or call our Advice Line nurses on 0800 801 0899.

### Tips to help you cope with tiredness

- ✓ Eat healthily and drink plenty of fluids
- ✓ Keep as active as you can and try to exercise regularly
- ✓ Get good-quality sleep
- ✓ Lose weight if you are overweight
- ✓ Cut out caffeine
- ✓ Drink less alcohol
- ✓ Make sure you find time to relax
- ✓ Plan ahead and pace yourself

If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,  
please call the Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line nurses

**0808 801 0899**

free to call from landlines and mobiles.