



“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. Fatigue can affect anyone, and most adults will experience it at some point in their life - in fact, around 1.5 million Australians see their doctor about fatigue each year. Fatigue is a symptom, not a condition, and although sometimes described as tiredness, it is different to just feeling tired or sleepy. Everyone feels tired at some point, but this is usually resolved with a nap or a few nights of good sleep. Someone who is sleepy may also feel temporarily refreshed after exercising, whereas they may not if fatigue is the issue.”

## 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 and grief, and may be accompanied by other signs and symptoms, including irritability and 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 and Symptoms of Fatigue

Fatigue can cause a vast range of other physical, mental and emotional symptoms including:

- Chronic tiredness and sleepiness
- Blurred vision
- Difficulty keeping eyes open
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Poor concentration
- Irritability
- Impaired judgement
- Appetite loss

- Reduced attention span
- Low motivation
- Impaired immune system

## Fatigue in the Workplace

Shift work and shifts with extended hours refer to any non-standard work schedule. The traditional 8-hour day worked between 7am and 6pm has changed dramatically and many people now regularly work evening and night shifts and/or extended hours. Studies show that shift work and shifts with extended hours can have significant adverse effects on health, workplace accident rates, absenteeism and a worker's personal life.

**“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.”**

## Health Effects of Shift Work

Partial sleep deprivation is the main problem that affects the health of shift workers. Night work disturbs the circadian rhythm in the human body. This is an internal body clock that is synchronised to a 24 hour period. It regulates a number of physiological functions such as temperature, hormone secretion, heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, digestion and mental alertness. Shift workers can have health problems because this internal clock is disturbed. Researchers have found several negative health effects in shift workers and workers on extended hours.

## Health Effects of Long-Term Sleep Deprivation

- Sleep disorders and increased fatigue
- Diabetes



- Heart disease and high blood pressure
- Digestion disorders
- Mental health issues (depression and anxiety)
- Medication side effects
- Decreased fertility
- Weight gain and obesity
- Immune system deficiency
- Memory loss and faulty brain function (balance, reflexes, motor skills)

## Tips to Improve Sleep, Boost Energy and Fight Fatigue

### Dietary Suggestions

- **Drink plenty of water:** A dehydrated body functions less efficiently. Aim for 6-8 glasses a day.
- **Be careful with caffeine:** One or two caffeinated drinks (like coffee and tea) per day boosts energy and mental alertness. However, heavy caffeine users (more than six drinks per day) are prone to anxiety, irritability and reduced performance. Avoid coffee after 4pm and also energy drinks, as they can leave you feeling worse once the sugar and caffeine wears off.
- **Eat breakfast:** Food boosts your metabolism and gives the body energy to burn. The brain relies on glucose for fuel, so choose carbohydrate-rich breakfast foods such as oats with fresh fruit or wholegrain bread.
- **Don't skip meals:** Going without food for too long allows blood sugar levels to dip. Try to eat regularly to maintain your energy levels throughout the day.
- **Have a healthy lunch:** Eat a combination of protein and carbohydrates for 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.
- **Don't overeat:** Large meals can drain your energy. Try eating six mini-meals to spread out your kilojoule intake more evenly. This will result in more constant blood sugar and insulin levels. You'll also find it easier to lose excess body fat if you eat this way.
- **Eat iron rich foods:** Women, in particular, are prone to iron-deficiency (anaemia). Make sure your diet includes iron rich foods such as lean red meat.

### Lifestyle Suggestions

- **Don't smoke:** Cigarette smoke contains many harmful substances and there are many 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, but the carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke reduces the amount of oxygen available in the blood.
- **Increase physical activity:** Physical activity boosts energy levels, while a sedentary lifestyle is a known cause of fatigue. A good bout of exercise also helps you sleep better at night.

- **Limit the time you sit down:** Reduce sedentary behaviours such as working at the computer and watching television. A brisk walk outside or even five (5) minutes stretching at your desk improves blood flow and boosts energy.
- **Seek treatment for substance abuse:** Excessive alcohol consumption or recreational drug use contributes to fatigue, and is unhealthy and potentially dangerous.
- **Workplace/Home issues:** Demanding jobs, conflicts at work or work and burnout are common causes of fatigue. Take steps to address any stressful issues during the day. A good place to start is to talk with your human resources officer, a friend, work colleague or GP.
- **Coping with the mid-afternoon energy slump:** Most people feel drowsy after lunch. This mid-afternoon drop in energy levels is linked to the brain's circadian rhythm and is 'hard wired' into the human body. Prevention may be impossible, but there are ways to reduce the severity of the slump. Incorporate as many fatigue fighting suggestions as you can into your lifestyle.

### Sleep Suggestions

- **Get enough sleep:** Adults need about eight hours sleep per night. Make the necessary changes to ensure you get a better night's sleep.
  - *Get up at approximately the same time everyday*
  - *Avoid going to bed too early (affects the 'deep sleep') and allow yourself time to wind down*
  - *Avoid using electronic devices within 30 minutes of bedtime*
  - *Avoid vigorous exercise, drinking alcohol and smoking at least 2-4 hours before going to bed*
  - *Don't go to bed hungry or with a full bladder*
  - *Keep your bedroom quiet, dark, well ventilated and cool, and avoid overheating with clothing and blankets*
- **Learn how to relax:** A common cause of insomnia is fretting about problems while lying in bed. Experiment with different relaxation techniques until you find one or two that work for you.
- **Avoid sleeping pills:** Sleeping pills are not a long term solution because they don't address the causes of insomnia. Many people find that they feel worse the next day after taking sleeping pills.

### Reach Out and Seek Additional Support

If you feel that you are feeling overwhelmed by the change and uncertainty, or if you feel that the stress and anxiety that you experience is becoming too much, reach out to your support networks; your GP, family, friends, Counsellor/Psychologist (through your EAP program).

CHG Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services are available at all of our sites (Mile End, Gillman and Elizabeth). We are now also offering EAP via video conference in addition to phone consults. Please contact [eap@chg.net.au](mailto:eap@chg.net.au) for more information or to book an appointment.

For more information:

[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) (Better Health Channel)

[www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/fatigue](http://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/fatigue)

[www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/fact-sheets](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/fact-sheets)

[www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/get-immediate-support](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/get-immediate-support) (1300 224 636)

[www.lifeline.org.au/resources](http://www.lifeline.org.au/resources) (Tool-kit Downloads)

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