



Post-Stroke Fatigue

Chest
Heart &
Stroke

Fatigue is one of the most common side effects post-stroke. Unlike usual tiredness, this fatigue does not subside with rest and many people find that the tiredness does not directly relate to their activity levels on any given day. Post-stroke fatigue can happen after any type of stroke, big or small. It can also happen after a transient ischaemic attack (TIA, or mini stroke).

Living with fatigue and its unpredictable nature can be frustrating and for some can be very disabling. The fact that this is an invisible side effect can make it hard for family, friends, and colleagues to understand.

Why do I feel so tired?

Fatigue experienced post-stroke is likely to be caused by a mixture of both physical and emotional factors.

Physical factors: The physical impact of the stroke on your body and brain can trigger fatigue especially in the early weeks and months due to the healing process. Rehabilitation can also be very tiring as this can involve learning to do things in a completely new way. Muscle weakness is a common side effect which means daily activities such as walking may take up more energy that they used to. You may also have trouble sleeping due to muscle stiffness or joint pain.

Emotional changes: It is normal after having a stroke to sometimes feel stressed, anxious, frustrated, or depressed. These emotions can come with a sense of fatigue and can also affect your sleep.

Medication: Some common medications have fatigue as a side effect, such as beta blockers for high blood pressure, epilepsy drugs and antidepressants. If you think medications are adding to your fatigue, discuss this with your doctor. Never stop taking medication without your doctor's advice.

Other medical causes:

- Some health conditions such as anaemia (low levels of iron in the blood), diabetes or an underactive thyroid gland can also make you feel tired.
- Sleeping problems such as insomnia (difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep) and sleep apnoea (interrupted breathing).
- Difficulty with swallowing or chewing could affect the amount of nutrients and energy you get from your food.
- Pain after stroke such as muscle pain or headaches can also contribute to your fatigue.

How can I manage post-stroke fatigue?

Fatigue can improve over time however there are currently no specific treatments or medications for it so self-management is key.

Communicate: Your tiredness may not be obvious to other people so it is important to let family and friends know how you are feeling. Ask for help if required and accept help when it is offered. Tell friends/family what will help you most, for example, keeping visits and phone calls short.

Recognise your triggers: There are many different triggers that can make your fatigue worse, from the obvious like cleaning the house, to the less obvious such as showering, getting dressed or even washing your hair. Being aware of these triggers can help you manage your fatigue and in turn make changes to your routine.

Rest: Rest is essential for recovery. There is no rule as to how long you should rest, it is advised to listen to your body and rest when needed. This could be sitting, lying down or physically sleeping. Be mindful of the amount of day time naps taken as this could impact on the quality of sleep at night.

Keep active: Keeping active helps with tiredness because it increases the blood flow around the body providing oxygen to your muscles so they can work better. This will give you more energy and also boost your mood. If you find doing a lot of activity makes you very tired, try breaking it up into smaller amounts. For example, instead of a 15-minute walk, do 3 walks of 5 minutes each and spread them out across your day. You will still get the health benefits but may not feel as tired.

Maintain a healthy weight: Being a healthy weight can help you feel less fatigued and reduce your risk of other health problems. Large meals, skipping meals or even high sugar snacks can trigger fatigue. Combining a healthy diet with regular physical activity is the best way to maintain a healthy weight.

Sleep hygiene: Adequate sleep can help you feel less tired, help with your recovery and healing and improve your mood and memory. A bedtime routine is essential.

Monitor caffeine: Caffeine can have a disruptive effect on your sleep, the most obvious effect of the stimulant is that it makes it hard for you to fall asleep. It is found in coffee, tea, chocolate and energy drinks. Try to limit caffeine and choose decaffeinated drinks where possible.

Be realistic about what you can and can't fit into a day:

- Plan your activities for when you feel less tired – for example, you might feel better in the morning rather than the afternoon.
- Give yourself plenty of time. Take breaks between activities and have a rest if you need it.
- Accept that some days will be better than others. Try to find a balance and not overdo it on a 'good day' as this can leave you exhausted for the next day.

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Northern Ireland
Chest Heart & Stroke
21 Dublin Road
Belfast BT2 7HB
T. 028 9032 0184
E. mail@nichs.org.uk
www.nichs.org.uk

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