

# Diagnosing and treating MS fatigue

Fatigue – one of the most common symptoms of MS – occurs in more than 8 out of 10 people. It can significantly interfere with a person's ability to function and is one of the primary causes of early departure from the workforce.

## Several factors contribute to fatigue in people with MS:

- **Over exertion.** Like everyone else, people with MS who push themselves too hard or too fast become fatigued.
- **Disrupted sleep.** Sleep may be disrupted by trips to the bathroom, pain, spasms caused by spasticity, periodic limb movements, or sleep apnea.
- **Depression.** A difficulty falling or staying asleep is common in people who are depressed and depression is one of the most common symptoms of MS.
- **Deconditioning.** When people with MS become less active, their bodies become deconditioned or “out of shape.” With deconditioning, even limited activity can be tiring.
- **Medication side effects.** Many medications produce fatigue or sleepiness.
- **Temperature sensitivity.** Many people with MS are sensitive to heat and humidity. Becoming overheated can make people feel tired and weak.
- **Poor nutrition.** An unhealthy diet that is high in sugar may produce feelings of fatigue.

In addition, the MS disease process causes changes that produce unique kinds of fatigue:

- **Lassitude.** This type of fatigue – often referred to as ‘MS fatigue’ – is characterized by an overwhelming exhaustion that prevents participation in physical and/or cognitive activities.  
MS fatigue:
  - Occurs on a daily basis, worsening as the day progresses
  - Comes on easily and suddenly and tends to be worsened by heat/humidity
  - Is unrelated to activity or sleep
  - Is thought to be caused by biochemical changes in the central nervous system
- **Impaired nerve conduction.** Nerves that are damaged by MS do not conduct impulses efficiently. When muscles do not receive adequate nerve impulses, they tire easily, causing a person's limbs to feel weak. Often with this type of fatigue, the legs feel stiff and heavy with extended standing or walking.



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## Fatigue Management

The first step in managing fatigue is to identify all the factors that may be contributing to it. Sometimes addressing those factors is enough to reduce the fatigue to a manageable level. This includes:

- Medical evaluation for possible non-MS causes of fatigue such as anemia, infection, thyroid problems, sleep apnea, depression or other possible illnesses and conditions.
- Review of all medications with your healthcare provider to identify any that may be contributing to feelings of sleepiness or fatigue.

If fatigue continues to be a problem, management options may include:

- Occupational therapy: strategies to simplify tasks at work and home.
- Physical therapy: exercise program to improve overall conditioning; energy-saving ways of staying mobile
- Sleep regulation: treating MS symptoms or other conditions that interfere with sleep
- Psychological interventions: stress management, relaxation training, membership in a support group, or psychotherapy.
- Cooling strategies
- Medications to help with sleepiness or mental fatigue — [amantadine hydrochloride \(Symmetrel®\)](#) and [modafinil \(Provigil®\)](#) — are the most commonly prescribed.

This information is made possible through a collaboration between the VA MS Centers of Excellence and the National MS Society, [www.nationalmssociety.org](http://www.nationalmssociety.org)