

Fatigue after stroke

Stroke Helpline: 0303 3033 100
or email: helpline@stroke.org.uk

Fatigue is very common after stroke and it can have a big effect on your life. This guide looks at the causes and impact of fatigue. It also suggests practical ways you can help yourself and seek support.

What is post-stroke fatigue?

Fatigue is different from normal tiredness, as it does not seem to get better with rest. It can happen after any type of stroke, big or small. It can also happen after a transient ischaemic attack (TIA, or mini-stroke).

The symptoms of fatigue vary between different people, but you may feel like you lack energy or strength and are constantly tired, physically and mentally. It can be mild or more severe.

It's not always caused by being more active or working harder. You might need to rest or sleep more than normal. Fatigue could make it difficult for you to take part in everyday activities. It can also affect your recovery and rehabilitation.

If you think you have fatigue, speak to your GP or therapist. They may be able to help to find out if something like a medication or infection is causing the fatigue, or if it's more likely to be due to the stroke. They may also be able to suggest ways to manage your fatigue.

You can find out how to understand the triggers for your fatigue and how to manage it. Fatigue often gets better over time. You can help to improve your recovery by getting support and trying techniques for managing fatigue.

Who can get post-stroke fatigue?

Fatigue can happen after any type of stroke or a TIA. Even if you have made a full physical recovery, or your stroke was some time ago, fatigue can still be a problem. It can start soon after a stroke or appear some time later. It's more common in people who had fatigue before a stroke.

Many people describe fatigue as the most difficult and upsetting problem after a stroke. You may not feel able to engage fully in rehabilitation because you feel so tired. It can affect your ability to regain your independence in day-to-day life. It might be difficult to return to work or to socialise and enjoy everyday activities. It can also affect your relationships, as family and friends may not understand how genuinely exhausted you feel on a daily basis.

Why do I feel so tired?

Fatigue after stroke can be associated with physical and emotional changes after a stroke, as well as some other factors.

Physical effects of stroke

The physical impact of the stroke on your brain and body can trigger fatigue. In the early weeks and months after a stroke, your brain and body are healing.

The rehabilitation process can involve trying to do things in a completely new way or learning and doing exercises. This can be very tiring.

You may have lost some of your fitness and strength while in hospital or as a result of the stroke. If you're not able to move around much, this can also lead to feelings of fatigue.

If you have muscle weakness after your stroke, walking and other movements could take up much more energy than before your stroke.

Emotional changes

Fatigue shares some of the signs of depression, such as feeling low, having anxiety, sleep problems and tiredness, but it's not the same thing.

It is not always easy to tell apart the symptoms of fatigue from depression. People can have both at the same time and fatigue may cause low mood and anxiety.

Talk to your GP and explain what you're going through. Discuss the treatment options available and what would work best for you. You are the expert on your own situation and you might feel sure your symptoms are due to the stroke rather than emotional changes.

You can ask if there is a local fatigue management service. There may be help available with healthy eating, being more active and increasing your fitness and strength, such as physiotherapy or a cardiac rehabilitation programme.

If you feel emotional changes play a part in your fatigue, you can ask about treatment for depression, including medication and counselling. Visit [stroke.org.uk/emotional-changes](https://www.stroke.org.uk/emotional-changes) for more information.

Other factors

Sleep problems

Sleep changes after stroke can be due to a number of reasons, including the brain injury itself, changes to daily activities, medications, pain, incontinence or mood changes such as feeling low or anxious.

Sleeping problems, such as insomnia and sleep apnoea (interrupted breathing), can make you feel tired during the day.

Insomnia means you often have problems falling asleep, or that you wake up throughout the night, have trouble getting back to sleep, or wake too early. In some cases, sleep problems might resolve on their own. However, if you are concerned, speak to your GP or stroke nurse, who may refer you to another health professional. For some people, a treatment called cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) might be helpful for reducing symptoms of insomnia.

Sleep apnoea is when your breathing stops and starts during sleep. Other symptoms include loud snoring and making gasping, snorting or choking sounds while asleep. You could ask someone to check for symptoms while you sleep. If it's not treated, sleep apnoea can lead to an increased risk of stroke. Speak to your GP who may refer you for tests.

Diet

If you have trouble with swallowing or chewing, this could affect the amount of energy and nutrients you gain from your food.

Health problems

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.

Pain

If you have pain after stroke such as muscle pain or headaches, this can also affect your energy levels.

Medication side-effects

Some common medications have fatigue as a possible side effect, such as beta blockers for high blood pressure, epilepsy drugs and antidepressants.

If you think your medication is causing side effects, your GP or pharmacist can give advice. You may be able to try different types of medication. Do not stop taking your medication without speaking to your GP or pharmacist.

Managing your fatigue

Although there is not a clearly defined treatment for post-stroke fatigue, there are some practical steps you can take to reduce and manage your fatigue.

It is important to get individual advice from a GP or other health professional, to ensure you have identified any underlying health problems. They can also help you to get the right support with your fatigue.

Find out the cause of your fatigue

Try to find out if there are any treatable causes for your fatigue. Your GP or stroke nurse can check if you have any medical conditions that could be making you feel tired.

Ask the GP for a review of your current medication. If your fatigue is at least partly caused by side effects of your medication, it usually improves with time or once you start a new medication.

Help others understand your fatigue

Your tiredness may not be obvious to other people so they may not understand how you feel. Show your family and friends this guide to help them understand. They can offer you support with your recovery and dealing with tasks.

"The fatigue is part of everyday life which I've learned to live with. Determination is key. I've never accepted the effects of stroke but I've adapted to them."

Andrew M, stroke survivor

Pace, plan and prioritise (the 'three Ps')

Think about the 'three Ps' to help you learn to manage your fatigue. Fatigue can follow a pattern. Learning to understand this can help you make the most of your energy.

- 1. Pace:** thinking about how you can take things step-by-step at a manageable speed, without triggering your fatigue.
- 2. Plan:** working out what you want to do, and planning when and how you can do it.
- 3. Prioritise:** deciding which activities are important to you, and which ones you can leave or get some help with.

Visit the Royal College of Occupational Therapists website at rcot.co.uk/conserving-energy for more tips.

Do not make it hard for yourself by trying to do all the things you used to do. You might need to slow down to save your energy. It can be helpful to lower your expectations of what you can achieve for a while, so you can build up stamina and strength again slowly.

More tips for reducing and managing fatigue



Give yourself plenty of time to recover from your stroke. It can take many months before post-stroke fatigue starts to lift. Accepting it takes time to improve can help you cope better.



Find out how much you can do in a day and stick to it. For example, if you can achieve about four hours of activity a day with rests in between, without being too tired, then that is the right level for you. If you do too much, you may find you need to rest more or spend a day in bed to recover.



Take proper breaks before or after doing things. Even gentle activities like talking with friends, a car journey or eating a meal can be tiring.



Try to do some exercise, as this may help to improve fatigue. Start gently, such as with a very short walk or a few minutes on an exercise bike. Slowly build it up without overdoing it. Ask a physiotherapist for help with this. Visit stroke.org.uk/getting-active for ideas on being more active.



Build up stamina and strength slowly or you may feel you are going backwards if your fatigue worsens. Increase your activity gradually.



Keep a diary of what you are doing, even if it's just a few notes or a photograph each day. Over time, this really helps to remind you of your progress. It will help you understand how much activity you can cope with and what triggers your fatigue.



Celebrate your successes. Many people feel frustrated by what they cannot do and forget to feel good about what they can do.



Rest and sleep: you might need to rest or nap during the day. But if you are having trouble sleeping at night, avoid sleeping during the day. It may not feel like sleep helps with your fatigue, but a poor night's sleep is likely to make your fatigue worse. Look for ways to sleep better, such as comfortable bedding and a dark, quiet room. Keep a good routine, with plenty of light exposure in the mornings.



Start to wind down during the evening and get into a bedtime routine. Try to avoid watching television or using devices like smartphones just before going to bed, as this can affect your ability to fall asleep.



Eat healthily. Try to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day as part of a balanced diet. If you have trouble swallowing or eating after a stroke, you will need support from a dietician to help you eat the right types of food. Ask your GP to refer you for help.



Seek support. Your GP surgery or occupational therapist can put you in touch with different types of support. This could include stroke clubs, counselling, relaxation programmes, exercise groups or alternative therapies. Visit stroke.org.uk/support or call our Helpline for details of stroke clubs and other support in your area.

Work and fatigue

If you are working, or thinking of going back to work, fatigue can have an impact on you. These practical tips may help, as well as seeking professional support and advice.

- Give yourself plenty of time to recover from your stroke before going back to work. Putting pressure on yourself could make it harder.
- Talk to your employer about your stroke and how it has affected you. This can help them make any reasonable adjustments needed to help you to do your job, such as having breaks more often.
- Think about having a phased return. This could mean working part-time at first, perhaps only for a couple of hours each day or every other day. Some people find fatigue occurs later in the day and feels like 'hitting a wall'. To help you manage your energy levels, start with tasks and working hours that are manageable for you and build up slowly. Talk to your employer and agree a plan that works for both of you.
- An occupational therapist could assess your workplace. They will advise whether to adapt any equipment you use or change working practices. If you do not have an occupational therapist, your GP can refer you or your employer may appoint one.
- You could talk to your colleagues and explain your post-stroke fatigue. Because the tiredness is not visible, it is unlikely they will know about it unless you tell them.

Visit stroke.org.uk/work for more information about work and stroke or call our Helpline for a printed copy of 'A complete guide to work and stroke'.

"I feel tired a lot now but know that I just need to rest a bit more and be patient with myself. I'm back at work and manage my hours more stringently so that I don't exhaust myself."

Paula M, stroke survivor

Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

Helpline

Our Helpline offers information and support for anyone affected by stroke, including family, friends and carers.

Call us on **0303 3033 100**, from a textphone **18001 0303 3033 100**
Email **helpline@stroke.org.uk**

Read our information

Log onto **stroke.org.uk** where you can find easy-to-understand information, videos and an online community to support you. You can also call the Helpline to ask for printed copies of our guides.

Other sources of help and information

Headway

Website: **headway.org.uk**

Tel: **0808 800 2244**

A brain injury charity with information and advice including a 'Fatigue after brain injury' guide.

NHS Better Health

Website: **nhs.uk/every-mind-matters**

Provides tips and videos about better sleep and offers a sleep programme email newsletter.

Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT)

Website: **rcot.co.uk**

Tel: **020 3141 4600**

The RCOT is the professional body for occupational therapists in the UK. It has a number of specialist sections covering areas like neurological practice and independent (private) practice. It offers a list of private therapists and advice on choosing an occupational therapist.

Your notes

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Your notes

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About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That's why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.

How did we do?

To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at **feedback@stroke.org.uk**

Accessible formats

Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.

Always get individual advice

This guide contains general information about stroke. But if you have a problem, you should get individual advice from a professional such as a GP or pharmacist. Our Helpline can also help you find support. We work very hard to give you the latest facts, but some things change. We don't control the information provided by other organisations or websites.

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Every five minutes, stroke destroys lives. We need your support to help rebuild them. Donate or find out more at **stroke.org.uk**

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