

Fatigue Management

By Cynthia Bishop, RN



One of the most common MS symptoms is fatigue. Fatigue can be an extremely frustrating symptom, because it is invisible to others, yet can interfere significantly with your daily activities.

Fatigue in people with MS can have many causes. Heat can bring on fatigue. Heat can be internally generated, such as when you have a fever or have been exercising heavily. A hot environment can also cause fatigue. Some people with MS who can walk across a parking lot to a store in cool weather may not be able to do so on a ninety degree day in the summer. This is primarily because your nervous system does not conduct messages as efficiently at higher temperatures. The speed of nerve conduction is slowed by heat. This is true for everyone, not just for people with MS. The difference is that many people with MS already have significant fatigue, and the slowing of nerve impulses caused by heat makes the fatigue worse.

Medication side effects are another potential cause of fatigue. Many medications for pain and spasms can cause fatigue.

Tranquilizers and anticonvulsants can contribute to fatigue, and so can certain antidepressants.

Depression itself is a well known cause of fatigue. Depression is relatively common in people with MS, and it can often saps energy and makes people feel chronically exhausted.

Sleep problems are another reason that MS patients experience fatigue. Many folks with MS have insomnia, and, like anyone else who gets very little sleep during the night, they will spend the next day yearning to get the sleep they missed.

Finally, MS itself can cause fatigue . Although we are not one hundred percent sure of why this is true, it is probably because the disease interferes with the efficiency of nerve conduction.

Now, the important question is “What can we do to manage and reduce fatigue?”

There are a number of helpful strategies. Here are a few:

- An exercise program done in a cool environment (I know, the last thing a tired person wants to do is exercise! Yet studies have shown that exercise does help build endurance in MS patients)
- Avoidance of heat by planning outdoor activities in the morning or evening, and using cooling devices such as portable fans or misters.
- Using appropriate assistive devices and energy saving devices. (Perhaps using a scooter at the store or mall will

let you keep your energy up for shopping. Or maybe an electric can opener and food processor will help you have more energy left for cooking.

- Treating depression with counseling and/or medication. Don't be embarrassed to talk to your health care provider about feeling depressed. Often, appropriate treatment for depression will increase your energy level as well as your general quality of life.
- Medications for fatigue. There are a number of medications, which increase energy levels. Medications such as Provigil, Amantadine, Ritalin and Metadate can be helpful in keeping you alert and able to function
- Treatment for insomnia. Getting a good night's sleep will help you have energy the next day. For some people this may be as easy as avoiding caffeine. Other people may have fatigue from lack of sleep because they have problems breathing at night (sleep apnea) .If the breathing problem is treated, they will sleep better and have more energy the next day. Finally, some people may need to use a sleeping pill for a few weeks to help them establish a regular sleep pattern.

Working with your health care provider, and using fatigue reducing strategies in your own life, you can help break the grip of fatigue.